THE DIVIDE OF CHRISTENDOM

A Biblical Exploration of Christian Doctrine, Division, and Church Reconciliation

“Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

— Ephesians 4:3

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INTRODUCTION

CHRISTENDOM TODAY

CHAPTER ONE

What Do We See?

> *"Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation."*
> — Matthew 12:25

Jesus taught that "every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation" (Matthew 12:25). Those words should give every Christian pause.

Today, Christianity is divided into thousands of denominations, traditions, and theological movements. While estimates vary, the number is often placed in the tens of thousands. Despite their differences, most share one common conviction: a sincere belief that they are faithfully preserving the truth handed down through Scripture.

Yet the existence of so many divisions raises an important question:

How did the Church become so fragmented?

At the heart of many divisions are disagreements concerning doctrine. Christians often place great trust in their understanding of Scripture, their church traditions, and the teachers who have shaped their faith. While conviction is necessary, Scripture also warns of the dangers that accompany human weakness. Paul writes in Galatians 5:19–21 that discord, jealousy, rivalry, division, factions, and envy are works of the flesh. These warnings were not written for the world alone. They were written for believers.

When we look across Christendom today, what do we see? Do we see the unity and harmony to which Scripture calls believers, or do we see the division, rivalry, and factions against which it warns?

Certainly, many faithful Christians seek peace and pursue truth. Yet it is difficult to ignore the reality that division remains one of the defining characteristics of modern Christendom.

Paul also warned that a time would come when people would prefer teachings that satisfy their desires rather than teachings that are true (2 Timothy 4:3–4). It is easy to assume that this warning applies only to others—to another denomination, another church, or another theological tradition. Yet such assumptions deserve careful examination.

Are we not all fallen human beings?

Are we not all affected by limitations in our understanding, reasoning, and discernment?

Who among us fully comprehends the mind of God?

Who among us is Christ?

If these things are true, then humility becomes necessary.

It is entirely possible that every Christian possesses some measure of truth while also possessing some measure of error. None of us sees perfectly. None of us understands completely. We are all dependent upon God's grace as we seek to know Him more faithfully.

For this reason, I believe Christians need one another.

We are much like pieces of a great jigsaw puzzle. Each piece contains part of the picture, but no single piece reveals the whole image by itself. Every piece has strengths and limitations, places where it connects and places where it depends upon something outside itself.

This imagery echoes the biblical description of the Church as the body of Christ. Just as a body consists of many members with different functions, so too the Church consists of many believers, each contributing something valuable to the whole. No individual member is the entire body. No single part can fulfill every function.

Together, however, the pieces form a picture.

Together, the members form a body.

Together, believers more fully reflect the truth and wisdom of God than they do in isolation**.**

Purpose of This Discussion

The purpose of this discussion is not to attack, condemn, or belittle other Christians. Nor is it to argue that certain perspectives of doctrine are unimportant.

Truth matters deeply.

Rather, my hope is that Christians might lower some of the walls they have built between one another and begin moving toward reconciliation. We may not agree on every doctrine, practice, or tradition, but we can strive to understand one another better, sharpen one another through honest discussion, and remember the unity we share in Christ.

What Lies Ahead

This discussion is divided into several parts.

Part One examines some foundational principles that underlie many theological discussions and disagreements.

Part Two explores some of the most significant doctrinal controversies within Christianity.

Part Three considers the historical divisions that contributed to the fragmentation of Christendom and seeks to understand how those divisions developed.

Part Four turns to Scripture's instruction regarding how Christians should relate to one another and considers what reconciliation, unity, and faithfulness might look like within the body of Christ.

My hope is that, in seeking truth together, we might also learn to see one another once again as brothers and sisters in Christ**.**

A Brief Clarification

This discussion is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of Christian doctrine, history, or practice. The topics selected represent some of the major issues that have contributed to division within Christendom, but faithful believers may differ regarding both the subjects addressed and the conclusions reached. The perspectives offered here are presented humbly as one contribution to a much larger conversation. The author is not a teacher.

PART I

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

CHAPTER TWO

The Imperfect Nature of Human Understanding

Truth, Knowledge, and Humility

> *"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part..."*
> — 1 Corinthians 13:12

Before discussing doctrine, denominations, church history, or theological disagreements, it is necessary to acknowledge a simple reality:

Every human being is capable of being wrong.

This is not a statement of skepticism, nor is it an argument against truth. Christianity is founded upon the belief that truth exists and that God has revealed Himself through creation, Scripture, and ultimately through Jesus Christ (Psalm 19:1–4; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; John 14:6; Hebrews 1:1–2).

The issue is not whether truth exists.

The issue is whether any individual possesses a perfect understanding of that truth.

The answer, according to both Scripture and experience, is no.

Every believer sees through the limitations of human understanding. Our knowledge is shaped by our experiences, education, traditions, culture, and personal assumptions. Even sincere

Christians who love God and faithfully study Scripture often arrive at different conclusions concerning difficult doctrines.

Throughout history, devoted believers have disagreed over subjects such as church authority, baptism, spiritual gifts, salvation, free will, predestination, and countless other matters.

The existence of disagreement does not necessarily mean that one side is faithful and the other is rebellious. In many cases, it simply reveals the limitations of human understanding.

The Apostle Paul writes that we currently "see through a glass, darkly" and know only in part (1 Corinthians 13:12). Human knowledge remains incomplete. We understand some things clearly, others imperfectly, and some things not at all.

While God possesses perfect knowledge, mankind does not (Isaiah 55:8–9; Romans 11:33–34).

This reality should produce humility.

The Danger of Doctrinal Pride

One of the greatest dangers in theological discussion is the assumption that we have arrived at complete understanding.

Pride often disguises itself as certainty. A believer may become convinced that his interpretation of Scripture is so obvious and complete that disagreement can only be explained by ignorance, stubbornness, or rebellion.

Once this attitude develops, meaningful discussion becomes nearly impossible.

History demonstrates the consequences of this mindset.

Many divisions within Christianity began because individuals became convinced that they alone possessed the full truth while others possessed none of it. While conviction is necessary, conviction without humility frequently leads to unnecessary division (Proverbs 16:18; Romans 12:3).

The purpose of humility is not to eliminate conviction. Christians should pursue truth with seriousness and determination. Humility simply reminds us that our understanding remains imperfect and that we may still have something to learn (Proverbs 9:9; James 1:19).

A person can be confident in what he believes while remaining open to correction (Acts 18:24–26).

The Jigsaw Puzzle of Understanding

A useful way to think about doctrinal understanding is to imagine a large puzzle.

Each believer possesses pieces of that puzzle. Some pieces fit together clearly. Others appear confusing. No single individual holds every piece, nor can anyone fully see the completed picture alone.

This does not mean all ideas are equally correct. Some puzzle pieces belong to the picture, and others do not.

Yet it does mean that believers often benefit from listening carefully to one another.

One Christian may recognize truths another has overlooked. One tradition may preserve insights that another has forgotten. Through discussion, study, and mutual correction, the body of Christ can often arrive at a fuller understanding than any individual could achieve alone (Proverbs 27:17).

The Church was never intended to function as isolated individuals pursuing truth independently. Scripture describes believers as members of a body, each contributing uniquely to the whole (Romans 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27).

Just as the body requires many parts working together, so too does the pursuit of understanding.

Approaching Doctrine Properly

The purpose of this discussion is not to claim perfect understanding.

Instead, it is an attempt to explore important doctrines, examine areas of disagreement, and consider how Christians should respond to those disagreements.

Some conclusions presented in these pages may ultimately prove incomplete. Others may require refinement.

That possibility exists because the author, like every other believer, remains human.

The goal is therefore not to establish personal authority but to encourage thoughtful examination of Scripture.

- Every doctrine should be tested (1 Thessalonians 5:21).
- Every argument should be examined (Acts 17:11).
- Every conclusion should be measured against the Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

If something presented in this discussion is true, it should withstand scrutiny.

If something is wrong, it should be corrected.

Truth has nothing to fear from honest examination.

Why This Matters

The chapters that follow will explore some of the most debated subjects within Christianity. These discussions often generate strong opinions because they touch important questions concerning salvation, church authority, worship, and the Christian life.

Before entering those discussions, however, it is important to remember that fellow believers are not enemies.

The purpose of theological study is not victory in argument but growth in understanding (Ephesians 4:15).

Humility does not weaken truth.

It strengthens our ability to pursue it.

For this reason, humility serves as the foundation upon which every other chapter in this book must rest.

If we begin with the assumption that we may be mistaken, we become more willing to listen, more willing to learn, and ultimately more capable of recognizing truth when we encounter it (Proverbs 11:2; Philippians 2:3–4).

Closing Reflection

Truth and humility are not enemies.

The pursuit of truth requires humility because no believer possesses perfect understanding. We see only in part, and we learn gradually as God teaches us through Scripture, experience, correction, and fellowship with other believers.

For this reason, humility is not a weakness to overcome but a virtue to cultivate.

It is the foundation upon which meaningful discussion, genuine learning, and Christian unity can be built.

CHAPTER THREE

Perfection and the Purpose of Weakness

Humanity's Pursuit of Perfection

> *"My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."*
> — 2 Corinthians 12:9

Few ideas are as universally desired as perfection.

From childhood onward, people strive to improve themselves. We seek greater knowledge, stronger character, better health, greater skill, and more complete control over our circumstances. Success is often measured by how closely we approach an ideal version of ourselves. Failure, weakness, and limitation are commonly viewed as obstacles to be overcome.

This pursuit is not entirely misguided. Scripture repeatedly encourages growth, maturity, wisdom, righteousness, and holiness (Philippians 3:12–14; Hebrews 6:1). Christians are called to become more like Christ, to put away sin, and to pursue spiritual maturity (Ephesians 4:13–15).

Yet a problem arises when we assume that God's definition of perfection is identical to our own.

Human beings often define perfection as the complete absence of weakness. We imagine perfection as a condition in which every flaw has been removed, every struggle eliminated, and every limitation overcome.

Scripture presents a more nuanced picture.

Paul's Thorn in the Flesh

One of the clearest examples appears in the life of the Apostle Paul.

Paul describes receiving what he calls a "thorn in the flesh," a persistent affliction that troubled him deeply (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). The exact nature of this thorn is not revealed. Throughout history, Christians have suggested various possibilities, including illness, persecution, temptation, or some other ongoing burden.

Whatever its nature, Paul clearly desired its removal. Three times he pleaded with the Lord to take it away (2 Corinthians 12:8).

From a human perspective, the request appears reasonable. Why would God allow one of His most effective servants to continue carrying a burden that seemed to hinder his ministry? Surely Paul could accomplish more if this weakness were removed.

God's answer, however, was unexpected:

> *"My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."*
> — 2 Corinthians 12:9

Rather than removing the weakness, God revealed its purpose.

Strength Revealed Through Weakness

This response challenges many assumptions about perfection.

If weakness were inherently opposed to God's purposes, then removing Paul's affliction would have been the obvious solution. Instead, God allowed the weakness to remain because it served a greater purpose.

Paul eventually reaches a remarkable conclusion. Rather than merely tolerating his weakness, he begins to glorify God through it. He recognizes that his limitations create opportunities for God's power to become visible (2 Corinthians 12:9–10).

Human strength often produces self-reliance.

Human weakness frequently produces dependence upon God.

When people possess great ability, intelligence, influence, or resources, they may gradually begin trusting those things more than God Himself. Weakness has a way of exposing that tendency. It reminds us that we are not self-sufficient.

This does not mean weakness is inherently good or that suffering should be sought for its own sake. Rather, it means God can use weakness to accomplish purposes that strength alone often cannot (1 Corinthians 1:25–29).

The Difference Between Human and Divine Perfection

The lesson of Paul's thorn suggests that perfection must be understood differently than it often is.

Human perfection is frequently imagined as flawlessness.

Biblical perfection is more closely associated with completeness, maturity, and proper alignment with God's will (Matthew 5:48; James 1:4).

A tool is perfect when it fulfills the purpose for which it was created.

A tree is perfect when it produces the fruit it was designed to bear.

Likewise, a believer may be fulfilling God's purpose while still possessing limitations, weaknesses, and struggles.

The presence of weakness does not necessarily indicate failure.

In some cases, weakness may actually be part of God's design for a person's growth and usefulness.

The Perfection of Christ

This principle reaches its highest expression in Jesus Christ.

Christ possessed no sin (Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22), yet His earthly life was not characterized by worldly displays of power and prestige. He experienced hunger, exhaustion, sorrow, rejection, suffering, and death.

Isaiah describes the Messiah as one who would be despised and rejected by men (Isaiah 53:3).

To many observers, the crucifixion appeared to be weakness. Yet the cross became the greatest demonstration of God's power and love in human history.

What appeared to be defeat became victory.

What appeared to be weakness became redemption.

The pattern established by Christ is therefore consistent with the lesson taught through Paul. God's purposes are often accomplished through means that human wisdom would not choose.

The Christian Response to Weakness

Every believer encounters weakness in one form or another.

Some struggle with physical limitations. Others wrestle with emotional burdens, personal failures, difficult circumstances, or ongoing trials.

The natural response is often frustration. We want God to remove every obstacle immediately.

Sometimes He does.

Sometimes He does not.

When God chooses not to remove a weakness, it does not necessarily mean He has abandoned us. It may mean that He intends to accomplish something through that weakness that could not be accomplished otherwise (Romans 8:28).

Faith learns to ask not only:

> "Why has this burden been allowed?"

but also:

> "How might God use this burden for His purposes?"

A Biblical Definition of Perfection

The Christian understanding of perfection is ultimately found not in self-improvement but in surrender.

Perfection is not the achievement of flawless independence.

Perfection is becoming what God intends us to be.

A believer may possess great strengths or profound weaknesses. Neither condition alone determines spiritual maturity. What matters is whether that person is walking faithfully with God.

Paul remained weak in one area, yet he stood precisely where God desired him to stand.

In that sense, he had reached a deeper form of perfection than the world often recognizes.

A Christian's goal is therefore not merely to become stronger, wiser, or more capable, but to become faithful and useful despite being burdened.

For it is often through weakness that God's strength is made perfect (2 Corinthians 12:9–10).

Closing Reflection

The world often views weakness as an obstacle to overcome.

Scripture often presents weakness as an opportunity for God to work.

The lesson of Paul's thorn is not that Christians should seek suffering, nor that weakness is desirable in itself. Rather, it is that God is able to accomplish His purposes through people who recognize their dependence upon Him.

Human perfection seeks self-sufficiency.

Biblical perfection seeks faithfulness.

When believers learn to trust God in the midst of weakness, they discover that His strength is often most visible where their own strength reaches its limits.

For it is there that grace becomes sufficient, and God's power is made perfect in weakness.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Nature of Love

The Most Misunderstood Word

> *"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."*
> — John 15:13

Few words are used more frequently than the word *love*.

It appears in songs, books, conversations, and sermons. People speak of loving their families, their friends, their country, their possessions, and their hobbies.

Yet despite its common use, love is often misunderstood.

Many people define love primarily as an emotion. They view it as a feeling of affection, attraction, happiness, or attachment toward another person. While emotions often accompany love, Scripture presents love as something far deeper and more enduring.

Emotions rise and fall. They change with circumstances and are often influenced by factors beyond our control. If love were merely an emotion, it would be unstable and unreliable.

The biblical understanding of love is far more substantial.

Scripture presents love not simply as something we feel, but as something we choose to practice. It is demonstrated through action, sacrifice, service, and commitment.

Feelings may accompany love, but they are not its foundation.

To understand love properly, we must look beyond emotion and examine how God Himself defines it.

Love as Value

At its most basic level, love may be understood as the recognition of great value.

The things we love are the things we consider exceedingly valuable.

A person who values money sacrifices time and energy to acquire it.

A person who values knowledge sacrifices effort to obtain it.

A person who values family willingly gives of himself for their benefit.

What we are willing to sacrifice for reveals what we truly value.

This principle becomes important because sacrifice is one of the clearest expressions of love found throughout Scripture.

Love is not merely an emotional experience.

Love is what you significantly value.

The Relationship Between Love and Sacrifice

Jesus gives one of the clearest examples of love when He says:

> *"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."*
> — John 15:13

The significance of this statement cannot be overstated.

Life is the greatest possession a person has. Every achievement, relationship, possession, and experience exists within the span of one's life.

To willingly surrender life itself for another person represents the ultimate act of sacrifice.

Christ identifies this sacrifice as the highest expression of love.

This reveals an important principle:

The depth of love is often measured by the willingness to sacrifice.

A person may speak eloquently about love, but genuine love eventually expresses itself through action.

Parents sacrifice sleep, comfort, resources, and personal desires for their children.

Friends sacrifice time and energy for one another.

Spouses sacrifice personal interests for the health of their marriage.

The greater the value placed upon another person, the greater the willingness to sacrifice for their benefit.

Love therefore cannot be separated from sacrifice.

Love Expressed Through Service

Sacrifice often takes a practical form: service.

Jesus taught His disciples that greatness in God's kingdom operates differently than greatness in the world. The world associates greatness with power, status, authority, and recognition. People seek positions that elevate themselves above others.

Christ reversed this model entirely.

He taught that the greatest among His followers would be servants (Mark 10:42–45; Matthew 20:25–28).

This principle reveals a profound truth about love.

Love does not merely admire.

Love serves.

Service requires effort.

It requires patience.

It requires time.

It often requires enduring inconvenience for the benefit of another person.

A servant voluntarily places the needs of others before his own comfort.

This is precisely what love does.

Whenever a person willingly serves another for that person's good, love is being expressed.

Christ as the Perfect Example of Love

Every discussion of love ultimately points back to Jesus Christ.

Christ did not merely teach about love.

He embodied it.

Throughout His ministry, He consistently placed Himself at the service of others.

He healed the sick.

He comforted the broken.

He fed the hungry.

He instructed the ignorant.

He forgave sinners.

He welcomed those whom society rejected.

Again and again, Christ demonstrated that love is not passive.

Love acts.

One of the most remarkable statements in Scripture says:

> *"For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."*
> — Mark 10:45

The Creator entered His creation not to be served but to serve.

The King became a servant.

The Lord became a sacrifice.

Every aspect of Christ's ministry points toward the same conclusion:

Love seeks the good of another even at personal cost.

The cross stands as the ultimate demonstration of this principle.

There, love and sacrifice meet in their fullest expression.

Love Is More Than Kindness

Many people equate love with being agreeable or pleasant.

While kindness is certainly an aspect of love, love cannot be reduced to mere niceness.

There are times when love requires difficult actions.

A parent disciplines a child because the parent values the child's future.

A friend offers correction because he values the relationship and desires the other's growth.

A physician may cause temporary pain in order to promote healing.

None of these actions necessarily feel pleasant in the moment.

Yet they may still be loving.

Love is not defined by whether an action feels good.

Love is defined by whether it genuinely seeks the good of the one being loved.

This distinction helps explain many difficult passages of Scripture.

God's corrections, warnings, and disciplines are not evidence of His lack of love. Rather, they are often expressions of His commitment to our growth and well-being (Hebrews 12:5–11).

The Characteristics of Love

Perhaps the most famous description of love appears in 1 Corinthians 13:4–8.

Paul describes love as patient and kind.

Love does not envy.

Love does not boast.

Love is not proud.

Love is not self-seeking.

Love is not easily angered.

Love rejoices in truth.

Love bears burdens.

Love endures difficulties.

Love remains faithful.

These qualities reveal that love is fundamentally oriented away from self and toward others.

Selfishness asks:

> "What can I gain?"

Love asks:

> "What can I give?"

Pride seeks elevation.

Love seeks service.

Envy seeks possession.

Love seeks blessing.

The more closely a person follows the example of Christ, the more these characteristics begin to emerge.

The Foundation of Christian Living

The significance of love extends beyond personal relationships.

Love is the foundation upon which the Christian life rests.

Every commandment ultimately finds fulfillment in love (Matthew 22:37–40; Romans 13:8–10).

Love governs how believers relate to God.

Love governs how believers relate to one another.

Love governs how believers approach truth, correction, service, generosity, and forgiveness.

Without love, even correct doctrine can become destructive.

Knowledge without love often produces pride (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Truth without love often becomes harshness.

Conviction without love often becomes division.

Many of the chapters that follow will explore difficult doctrines and longstanding disagreements among Christians. Such discussions are necessary, but they must always remain governed by love.

When love is absent, doctrine becomes a weapon of division.

When love is present, doctrine becomes a means of helping one another draw closer to God.

Love and God's Character

Ultimately, love is not merely something God commands.

Love is something God is.

Scripture declares that God is love (1 John 4:8).

Every act of creation, redemption, mercy, patience, and salvation flows from His character.

The story of Scripture is, in many ways, the story of God's love for His creation.

From the Garden of Eden to the Cross of Christ and ultimately to the restoration of all things, God's actions consistently reveal His desire to reconcile humanity to Himself.

The Christian life therefore involves more than believing certain truths.

It involves learning to reflect the character of the God who loved us first (1 John 4:19).

The more we grow in love, the more we become like Christ.

And the more we become like Christ, the closer we come to fulfilling the purpose for which we were created.

Closing Reflection

Love is more than emotion.

It is more than affection.

It is more than agreement.

Biblical love is revealed through value, sacrifice, service, and commitment.

It seeks the good of others, even when doing so requires personal cost.

This is the love demonstrated by Christ throughout His ministry and ultimately upon the cross.

For this reason, love is not merely one virtue among many.

It is the foundation upon which Christian character is built and the lens through which every doctrine, disagreement, correction, and relationship should be viewed.

The closer believers grow to Christ, the more they learn to love as He loved.

And in doing so, they reflect the very character of God Himself.

CHAPTER FIVE

Destiny and the Sovereignty of God

The Question of Destiny

> *"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."*
> — Philippians 2:13

Few questions have occupied the minds of believers more than the relationship between God's sovereignty and human choice.

If God is all-knowing and all-powerful, how much of human life is determined by His will?

If God has a purpose for creation, do human decisions truly matter?

Can a person alter the course of his life through his choices, or is every event already fixed according to a divine plan?

These questions have led to some of the most significant theological debates in Christian history. Entire systems of doctrine have been built around attempts to answer them. Yet despite centuries of discussion, Christians continue to wrestle with the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

Part of the difficulty arises because Scripture appears to affirm both realities simultaneously.

God is unquestionably sovereign (Psalm 115:3; Daniel 4:35).

Yet human beings are repeatedly held accountable for their actions (Deuteronomy 30:19–20; Joshua 24:15).

The challenge is not choosing one truth over the other, but understanding how both operate together.

What Is Sovereignty?

To say that God is sovereign means that He possesses ultimate authority over all creation.

Nothing exists apart from His will (Colossians 1:16–17).

Nothing occurs beyond His knowledge (Psalm 139:1–6).

No power can successfully oppose His purposes (Isaiah 46:9–10).

Scripture consistently presents God as the ruler of Heaven and Earth. He creates, sustains, judges, directs, and governs all things according to His wisdom (Psalm 103:19; Ephesians 1:11).

This sovereignty is not merely power.

It is purposeful power.

God is not a passive observer watching history unfold from a distance. He actively works within creation to accomplish His purposes (Romans 8:28).

Yet the existence of divine sovereignty immediately raises another question:

If God governs all things, what role remains for human choice?

Human Responsibility in Scripture

Throughout the Bible, human beings are treated as responsible moral agents.

Adam and Eve are given commands and held accountable for their disobedience (Genesis 2:16–17; Genesis 3:11–19).

Cain is warned concerning sin before he murders Abel (Genesis 4:6–7).

Israel is repeatedly called to choose obedience rather than rebellion (Deuteronomy 30:19–20).

The prophets call people to repentance.

Christ invites individuals to follow Him (Matthew 4:19).

The Apostles urge believers to remain faithful.

These commands would seem meaningless if human decisions carried no significance.

Scripture consistently speaks as though people are capable of making real choices and are responsible for the consequences of those choices.

Passive Destiny

God created the garden.

He established the boundaries.

He provided instructions.

He knew what would happen.

Yet Adam and Eve still made their own choices (Genesis 2–3).

Likewise, Cain chose to murder Abel despite receiving a warning from God beforehand (Genesis 4:6–8).

God's foreknowledge did not eliminate Cain's responsibility.

The decision remained with Cain.

These examples suggest that God's knowledge of future events does not necessarily remove human responsibility. People continue to act according to their own desires and intentions, even when God already knows the outcome.

Hands-On Destiny

Scripture also presents situations in which God acts more directly within human history.

One example appears in Ezekiel's prophecy concerning the new covenant:

> *"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you."*
> — Ezekiel 36:26

Here God is not merely observing human behavior.

He is acting within people to transform them.

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus provides another example (Acts 9:1–19).

Saul was actively persecuting Christians when Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus. That encounter dramatically changed the direction of his life.

The intervention was direct.

God did not merely observe Saul's future choices.

He stepped into history and altered Saul's course.

God's Work Within the Believer

Paul writes:

> *"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."*
> — Philippians 2:13

This statement reveals that God's activity extends beyond external circumstances.

He works within His people.

He shapes desires.

He provides conviction.

He grants understanding.

He strengthens faith.

He empowers obedience.

Yet in the very same passage believers are commanded to work out their salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12–13).

The two realities appear side by side.

God works.

Believers respond.

Neither truth eliminates the other.

The Mystery of Foreknowledge

God knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10).

He sees what is hidden from human sight (Psalm 139:16).

Because of this, God's knowledge does not function like human prediction.

Human beings make educated guesses about future events.

God knows the future because He stands outside the limitations of time and sees history in its entirety.

How divine foreknowledge relates to human freedom has been debated throughout Christian history.

Scripture affirms both realities without fully explaining how they interact.

Rather than eliminating mystery, the biblical witness often calls believers to trust the wisdom of God even where complete understanding remains beyond human reach (Romans 11:33–34).

The Example of Joseph

Joseph's brothers acted out of jealousy and hatred when they sold him into slavery.

Their actions were sinful.

They were fully responsible for what they did.

Yet years later Joseph tells them:

> *"Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good."*
> — Genesis 50:20

Notice what Joseph does not say.

He does not deny their responsibility.

Neither does he deny God's sovereignty.

Both truths remain intact.

Human beings acted according to their intentions.

God worked through those actions to accomplish a greater purpose.

The story demonstrates that God's sovereignty does not merely operate despite human choices. In many cases, He works through them, bringing about outcomes that serve His purposes even when human intentions are sinful.

Closing Reflection

The relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility remains one of the deepest mysteries in Christian theology.

Scripture affirms both realities.

God reigns over creation and accomplishes His purposes.

Human beings make real choices and remain accountable for them.

Rather than forcing one truth to eliminate the other, the Bible consistently presents them side by side.

The believer is therefore called to trust God's sovereignty without abandoning responsibility, and to exercise responsibility without forgetting God's sovereignty.

Like Joseph, we may not always understand how God's purposes are unfolding.

Yet we can trust that the One who governs history is also working through it for His glory and for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

CHAPTER SIX

Free Will and the Christian Life

The Gift of Choice

> *"I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life."*
> — Deuteronomy 30:19

Few aspects of human existence are more fundamental than the ability to choose.

Every day, people make decisions that shape the course of their lives. Some choices appear small and insignificant, while others carry consequences that extend for years. Throughout Scripture, God repeatedly addresses humanity as creatures capable of responding to Him. He commands, warns, invites, rebukes, and encourages (Deuteronomy 30:19–20; Joshua 24:15; Isaiah 1:18–20).

These actions imply that human decisions possess genuine significance.

Understanding Free Will

Scripture consistently treats human choices as meaningful.

God commands obedience because disobedience is possible.

God warns against sin because sin remains a real option.

God calls people to repentance because repentance requires a response (Acts 17:30).

Without meaningful choice, many of these commands would lose their significance.

The Bible therefore presents human beings not as passive observers of their lives but as active participants who must respond to God's call.

Freedom and Responsibility

With freedom comes responsibility.

Adam could not blame Eve for his disobedience (Genesis 3:12–13).

Cain could not blame his anger for Abel's death (Genesis 4:6–8).

Israel could not blame surrounding nations for its repeated rebellion (Judges 2:11–19).

Again and again, God addresses people as accountable moral beings.

Choices matter because actions have consequences. Scripture consistently holds individuals responsible for the decisions they make.

The Problem of Sin

Yet human freedom is not exercised in a perfect environment.

The Apostle Paul describes an internal conflict familiar to every believer:

> *"For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do."*
> — Romans 7:19

In Romans 7:14–25, Paul speaks of wanting to do good while simultaneously finding another law at work within himself that pulls him toward sin.

His experience reflects a struggle common to humanity.

People possess the ability to choose, yet those choices are often influenced by sinful desires, habits, fears, and weaknesses.

Freedom exists, but it exists within a fallen world.

Christ and the Submission of the Will

The perfect example of free will properly exercised is found in Jesus Christ.

Throughout His earthly ministry, Christ consistently submitted His will to the Father (John 5:30; John 6:38).

This submission reached its clearest expression in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Facing the suffering that awaited Him, Jesus prayed:

> *"Not my will, but thine, be done."*
> — Luke 22:42

This statement reveals something profound about obedience.

Submission is meaningful precisely because alternatives exist.

Christ's obedience was not robotic or automatic. It was a willing alignment of His human will with the will of the Father.

Temptation and Choice

Scripture teaches that believers will continue to face temptation.

The presence of temptation does not mean sin is inevitable.

Paul writes:

> *"God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape."*
> — 1 Corinthians 10:13

This does not mean temptation disappears.

Rather, it means believers are never left without the ability to choose faithfulness.

The Christian life involves continually deciding whether to follow God's direction or the desires of the flesh.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

The Christian does not face these choices alone.

The Holy Spirit actively works within believers, producing conviction, guidance, strength, and transformation (John 14:26; John 16:13; Galatians 5:16–18).

This divine assistance does not eliminate human participation.

Rather, it enables it.

God provides the strength, wisdom, and conviction necessary for faithful living, while believers remain responsible for responding to His leading.

Once again, Scripture presents divine activity and human response working together rather than in opposition.

Freedom and Love

Love cannot be compelled.

Forced affection is not love.

Compelled devotion is not devotion.

For love to exist, a person must possess the ability to choose it.

Throughout Scripture, God seeks a relationship with humanity characterized by genuine love and faithfulness (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37–38).

He invites rather than merely compels.

He calls rather than merely controls.

The invitation to love God would have little meaning if love itself were impossible to choose.

The Christian Life as Daily Surrender

The Christian life is not merely a single decision but a continual series of decisions.

Again and again, believers are called to place their own desires beneath the authority of God (Romans 12:1–2; Galatians 2:20).

This surrender is not a loss of freedom.

It is the proper use of freedom.

The more closely a believer aligns his will with God's will, the more he becomes the person he was created to be.

Christian maturity is therefore not the abandonment of choice but the repeated decision to follow Christ.

Closing Reflection

The Bible consistently presents human beings as responsible moral agents capable of responding to God.

Though sin complicates our choices and weakness often clouds our judgment, Scripture never treats human decisions as meaningless.

Believers are called to repent, obey, trust, love, and follow Christ. These commands assume that our responses matter.

At the same time, the Christian life is not lived through human effort alone. God works within His people through the Holy Spirit, guiding and strengthening them as they seek to follow Him.

Freedom and dependence are therefore not opposites.

The Christian life consists of freely choosing, day after day, to submit one's will to the God who first loved us.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Humanity's Purpose

The Question Every Generation Asks

> *"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man."*
> — Ecclesiastes 12:13

Few questions are more important than this:

Why are we here?

Throughout history, people have sought answers to that question through philosophy, science, religion, politics, and personal experience. Entire civilizations have been built around competing ideas concerning the purpose of human existence.

Some conclude that life has no ultimate purpose beyond survival and reproduction.

Others believe purpose is self-created through personal achievement, relationships, or legacy.

Scripture presents a very different answer.

According to the biblical narrative, humanity exists because God intended humanity to exist. We are not accidents of chance nor meaningless products of an indifferent universe. Human beings were created deliberately, purposefully, and with intention (Genesis 1:26–27).

To understand our purpose, we must first understand the One who created us.

Created by God

The opening chapters of Genesis establish a foundational truth:

Humanity is the result of God's creative will (Genesis 1:26–27).

Unlike the rest of creation, mankind receives special attention within the creation account. Scripture teaches that human beings were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27).

This statement has profound implications.

It does not mean humans become gods, nor does it suggest complete equality with God. Rather, it indicates that humanity uniquely reflects aspects of God's character and nature.

Human beings possess reason.

They possess creativity.

They possess moral awareness.

They possess the capacity for relationships.

Most importantly, they possess the ability to know and commune with their Creator because they bear His image.

This unique relationship distinguishes humanity from the rest of creation.

Our purpose cannot be understood apart from this relationship because it is central to why we were made.

Created for Fellowship

One of the clearest themes in Scripture is that God desires fellowship with His creation.

From the beginning, God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden (Genesis 3:8). The image presented is one of closeness, relationship, and communion.

Humanity was not created merely to exist.

Humanity was created to know God.

This truth continues throughout the biblical narrative.

God calls Abraham into covenant (Genesis 12:1–3).

He establishes a relationship with Israel.

He dwells among His people through the tabernacle and temple (Exodus 25:8; 1 Kings 8:10–11).

Ultimately, He enters creation through Jesus Christ (John 1:14).

The story of Scripture consistently reveals a God who desires relationship with humanity.

This does not mean God needs humanity. God is complete within Himself.

Rather, it reveals His desire to share His goodness, love, and fellowship with those He created.

Human beings find their greatest fulfillment when living within that relationship.

Stewardship and Responsibility

Humanity's purpose extends beyond fellowship alone.

In Genesis, mankind receives a responsibility.

Adam and Eve are instructed to exercise stewardship over creation (Genesis 1:28; Genesis 2:15).

They are called to cultivate, manage, and care for what God has made.

This principle remains important.

Human beings were never intended to be passive observers within creation.

They were created to participate in God's work.

Throughout history this stewardship has taken many forms.

People build families.

They develop communities.

They create art.

They pursue knowledge.

They cultivate the earth.

They establish systems of justice.

They care for one another.

These activities reflect humanity's role as stewards rather than owners.

Creation ultimately belongs to God (Psalm 24:1).

Human beings are entrusted with its care.

The Christian understanding of purpose therefore includes responsibility.

Life is not merely about personal fulfillment.

It involves faithful stewardship of what God has entrusted to us.

The Family of God

Another important theme throughout Scripture is the concept of family.

God repeatedly describes His relationship with believers using familial language.

He is called Father (Matthew 6:9; Romans 8:15).

Believers are called children of God (Romans 8:14–17; Galatians 4:4–7).

The Church is described as God's household (Ephesians 2:19).

This imagery reveals something significant about humanity's purpose.

God's plan extends beyond individual salvation.

His purpose involves the creation of a people who belong to Him.

From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture moves toward the formation of a redeemed family gathered from every nation, tribe, people, and language (Revelation 7:9).

This helps explain why relationships matter so deeply within the Christian life.

Human beings were not created for isolation.

We were created for community.

The command to love God and love one's neighbor reflects this reality (Matthew 22:37–40).

The Christian life is lived both vertically and horizontally.

We are called into a relationship with God and with one another.

The Distortion of Purpose

If humanity was created for fellowship, stewardship, and relationship, why does the world appear so fractured?

The answer lies in the entrance of sin (Genesis 3).

Sin disrupted the purposes for which humanity was created.

Relationship with God was damaged.

Relationships between people became strained.

Stewardship became corrupted by selfishness and greed.

Instead of serving God's purposes, humanity increasingly pursued its own.

The consequences of this distortion are visible throughout history.

Violence, oppression, pride, division, and suffering all reveal the effects of a creation that no longer functions as originally intended.

Yet even after the fall, God's purpose for humanity did not disappear.

It became the object of redemption.

Christ and the Restoration of Purpose

Jesus Christ enters the biblical story not merely to forgive sins but to restore what was lost.

Through Christ, humanity is invited back into fellowship with God (2 Corinthians 5:18–19).

The relationship broken by sin can be renewed.

The image of God within mankind begins to be restored.

The Christian life is therefore not simply preparation for heaven.

It is the beginning of restoration.

Believers are gradually transformed into the likeness of Christ (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18).

They learn to love as He loved.

They learn to serve as He served.

They learn to live according to the purpose for which they were originally created.

Redemption is not merely rescue.

It is restoration.

God is reclaiming what sin has damaged.

Glorifying God

One of the most historic answers given by Christians to the question of humanity's purpose is that mankind exists to glorify God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

This does not mean God created humanity merely to receive praise.

Rather, it means that human life finds its proper fulfillment when it reflects the character, goodness, wisdom, and love of its Creator.

A life lived in obedience, gratitude, worship, service, and love brings glory to God.

In this sense, glorifying God is not separate from humanity's purpose.

It is the fulfillment of it.

The more human beings become what they were created to be, the more God's glory is reflected through them.

The Future Purpose of Humanity

Scripture concludes with a vision of complete restoration.

The final chapters of Revelation describe a renewed creation in which God dwells with His people (Revelation 21–22).

The separation introduced by sin is removed.

The fellowship humanity was created for is fully restored.

God's people dwell in His presence.

Creation is renewed.

The purposes established in the beginning find their fulfillment in the end.

The biblical story therefore moves from creation, to fall, to redemption, and finally to restoration.

Humanity's purpose is not abandoned.

It is completed.

Closing Reflection

Humanity was not created by accident.

We were created by God, in the image of God, and for a relationship with God.

Our purpose includes fellowship, stewardship, community, service, and the reflection of God's character within the world.

Though sin has distorted these purposes, Christ came to restore what was lost.

The Christian life is therefore more than the avoidance of sin or the pursuit of heaven.

It is the gradual restoration of humanity to the purpose for which it was originally created.

In Christ, believers begin to rediscover who they were meant to be.

And in the age to come, that restoration will be brought to completion.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Purpose of Scripture

Why Scripture Matters

> *"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."*
> — Psalm 119:105

Every discussion in this book ultimately depends upon a single question:

How do we know what we know about God?

Christians have debated countless doctrines throughout history. They have disagreed about salvation, church authority, baptism, spiritual gifts, predestination, worship practices, and many other subjects. Yet beneath all of these discussions lies a more fundamental issue.

What is the source of our understanding?

If humanity is limited in its knowledge, as discussed earlier, then any attempt to understand God requires revelation. Human reason can observe aspects of creation and draw certain conclusions, but reason alone cannot fully explain God's nature, purposes, or plan of redemption.

For that, God must reveal Himself.

Scripture stands as the primary record of that revelation (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

It is through Scripture that believers learn who God is, what He has done, what He requires, and what He has promised.

Without revelation, humanity would be left to speculation.

With revelation, humanity is invited into understanding.

Revelation and the Knowledge of God

The Bible presents itself as more than a collection of religious writings.

It claims to be the record of God's interaction with humanity throughout history.

Within its pages, God reveals His character, His purposes, His commands, and His plan of redemption.

Through Scripture, believers encounter the story of creation, the fall of humanity, the calling of Israel, the ministry of Christ, the birth of the Church, and the promise of future restoration (Luke 24:27).

These events are not presented merely as historical information.

They reveal something about God Himself.

The justice of God is revealed through His judgments.

The mercy of God is revealed through His forgiveness.

The holiness of God is revealed through His commands.

The love of God is revealed through Christ (John 3:16; Romans 5:8).

Scripture therefore serves as a window through which believers come to know the character of God.

Scripture as a Guide

The Christian life involves countless decisions.

Some decisions concern major issues.

Others involve the ordinary circumstances of daily life.

In either case, believers require guidance.

Scripture provides that guidance by revealing principles that shape faithful living.

The Bible does not address every modern situation directly, yet it provides wisdom that applies across cultures, generations, and circumstances.

It teaches honesty.

It teaches justice.

It teaches humility.

It teaches forgiveness.

It teaches love.

It teaches stewardship.

It teaches faithfulness.

In this way, Scripture functions as a guide for life.

It illuminates the path ahead, helping believers navigate a world often marked by confusion and competing values.

Scripture and Correction

One of the less comfortable purposes of Scripture is correction.

Human beings possess a remarkable ability to justify their own behavior.

We often excuse our failures while condemning the failures of others. We are quick to defend our assumptions and slow to examine them.

Scripture confronts this tendency and equips believers for correction and growth (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Rather than allowing people to define truth for themselves, it calls them to submit to God's standards.

At times, Scripture encourages.

At times, it comforts.

At times, it convicts.

Many of the passages people find most challenging are precisely those that expose areas where personal desires conflict with God's will.

Correction is rarely pleasant, but it is necessary.

A person who refuses correction cannot grow.

Likewise, a Church that refuses correction risks drifting away from the truth it seeks to preserve.

Scripture and Transformation

The purpose of Scripture extends beyond information.

Its goal is transformation (Romans 12:2).

The Bible was not given merely so that people could accumulate knowledge. It was given so that people might be changed.

Knowledge alone does not produce spiritual maturity.

A person may know many facts about Scripture while remaining unchanged in character.

The purpose of revelation is not simply to inform the mind but to shape the heart.

As believers study Scripture, they encounter God's truth.

That truth challenges assumptions, reshapes priorities, and gradually transforms the way people think and live.

The process is often slow.

Growth rarely occurs overnight.

Yet through consistent exposure to God's Word, believers are increasingly conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).

The Unity of Scripture

Although the Bible consists of many books written by numerous authors across centuries, it possesses a remarkable unity.

Its authors lived in different cultures, spoke different languages, and wrote under vastly different circumstances.

Yet together they contribute to a single unfolding story centered upon God's redemptive work through Christ (Luke 24:27).

That story begins with creation.

It moves through humanity's fall into sin.

It traces God's covenant relationship with His people.

It reaches its climax in Jesus Christ.

And it concludes with the restoration of all things.

The unity of Scripture helps believers understand individual passages within the larger framework of God's purposes.

A verse should not be interpreted in isolation from the broader story it belongs to.

Doctrine develops most faithfully when Scripture is allowed to interpret Scripture.

Why Christians Disagree About Scripture

If Scripture serves as God's revelation, why do Christians disagree so frequently about its meaning?

This question lies at the heart of many doctrinal controversies.

The existence of disagreement does not necessarily mean Scripture is unclear. Often, disagreement arises because people approach Scripture with different assumptions, traditions, methods of interpretation, and theological frameworks.

Some passages are straightforward.

Others are more complex.

Some doctrines are stated explicitly.

Others require careful synthesis of multiple passages.

Because human understanding remains imperfect, believers sometimes reach different conclusions even when they are sincerely attempting to follow Scripture.

This reality should not produce despair.

Rather, it should reinforce the humility discussed earlier in this book.

The existence of disagreement does not remove the authority of Scripture.

It reminds us of the importance of approaching Scripture carefully and prayerfully.

Scripture and Doctrine

Every doctrine examined in the following chapters ultimately depends upon Scripture.

Questions concerning salvation, election, baptism, spiritual gifts, church authority, and countless other subjects must be evaluated according to God's Word (Acts 17:11).

Traditions may provide valuable insights.

History may offer important lessons.

Teachers may offer wisdom and guidance.

Yet all human authorities remain secondary to Scripture itself.

The goal of doctrinal study is not to defend traditions merely because they are familiar.

The goal is to understand what Scripture teaches.

This does not mean every doctrinal question will be resolved easily.

Some topics remain difficult and continue to generate disagreement among faithful believers.

Even so, Scripture remains the foundation upon which those discussions must rest.

Scripture and the Person of Christ

Ultimately, the purpose of Scripture is not merely to communicate information.

Its purpose is to lead people to Christ (John 5:39).

Throughout the Bible, the various narratives, prophecies, laws, poems, and teachings point toward God's work of redemption.

Jesus stands at the center of that story (Luke 24:27; Colossians 1:15–20).

The Old Testament anticipates Him.

The Gospels reveal Him.

The Epistles explain His work.

Revelation points toward His final victory.

To read Scripture properly is therefore to see how its various parts contribute to the larger story of God's redemptive purpose.

The Bible is not a collection of disconnected lessons.

It is a unified testimony to God's work through Jesus Christ.

Closing Reflection

Throughout this discussion we have considered humanity's limitations, the nature of love, the sovereignty of God, the reality of human choice, and the purpose for which humanity was created.

Yet none of these subjects can be understood rightly apart from God's revelation.

Scripture serves as both foundation and guide.

It reveals God.

It exposes errors.

It teaches the truth.

It directs believers toward Christ (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

As we move into the doctrinal disagreements that have contributed to division within Christianity, Scripture must remain our common point of reference.

Not because every disagreement will disappear.

But because every sincere pursuit of truth must ultimately begin and end with the Word of God.

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PART II

DOCTRINAL DISAGREEMENTS

CHAPTER NINE

Irresistible Grace

A Question About God's Call

> *"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him"*
> — John 6:44

Among the many disagreements that have shaped Christian theology, few have generated as much discussion as the doctrine commonly known as **Irresistible Grace**.

At its heart, the debate asks a simple question:

When God calls a person to salvation, can that call be resisted?

Most Bible based Christians agree that salvation originates with God (Ephesians 2:8–9). No one earns salvation through personal merit, moral achievement, or religious effort. Salvation is a gift of divine grace.

The disagreement concerns how that grace operates within the life of the individual.

Some Christians believe that when God intends to save a person, His grace will ultimately accomplish that purpose without fail.

Others believe that while God's grace initiates salvation and makes it possible, individuals retain the ability to reject or resist that grace.

Both sides appeal to Scripture.

Both seek to honor God's sovereignty.

Both desire to preserve biblical truth.

The challenge lies in understanding how the various passages fit together.

What Is Irresistible Grace?

The doctrine of irresistible grace is most commonly associated with Reformed theology.

In this view, God's saving call differs from the general proclamation of the Gospel.

The Gospel may be preached to many people, and many may hear it without responding. Yet when God extends His effective or inward call to those He intends to save, that call successfully brings them to faith.

This does not mean God drags people unwillingly into salvation.

Rather, proponents argue that God changes the heart in such a way that the individual willingly responds.

The person comes freely, but only because God has first transformed the desires of the heart (Ezekiel 36:26–27).

In this understanding, grace is irresistible not because it overwhelms human will but because it changes human will.

Biblical Arguments in Favor

Supporters of irresistible grace often point to the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John.

Christ teaches that no one can come to Him unless the Father draws him (John 6:44).

This passage emphasizes humanity's dependence upon divine initiative. People do not naturally move toward God on their own. God must first act.

Another frequently cited passage appears later in the same Gospel when Jesus declares that all whom the Father gives Him will come to Him (John 6:37).

For advocates of irresistible grace, this statement suggests certainty rather than possibility. Those given by the Father ultimately come to faith because God's purpose cannot fail.

The conversion of Lydia in the book of Acts is also often referenced.

Scripture states that the Lord opened her heart so that she responded to Paul's message (Acts 16:14).

This event appears to illustrate God actively working within a person to produce a response of faith.

Ezekiel's prophecy concerning a new heart and a new spirit likewise receives significant attention.The promise that God will remove hearts of stone and replace them with hearts of flesh is understood as evidence that salvation involves a divine transformation of the inner person (Ezekiel 36:26–27).

Taken together, these passages emphasize God's initiative, God's power, and God's ability to accomplish His purposes in salvation.

Biblical Arguments Against

Those who reject irresistible grace do not deny God's initiative.

Rather, they question whether divine initiative necessarily eliminates the possibility of resistance.

Several passages appear to suggest that God's work may be resisted.

Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin includes a direct accusation:

> *"Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost."*
> — Acts 7:51

This statement is often cited as evidence that human beings can resist God's activity.

Likewise, throughout the Old Testament, God repeatedly calls His people to repentance while they continually refuse to listen (Isaiah 65:2; Jeremiah 7:24–26).

The prophets frequently describe God's invitations being rejected.

Jesus Himself laments over Jerusalem, expressing a desire to gather its people together even though they were unwilling:

> *"How often would I have gathered thy children together ... and ye would not!"*
> — Matthew 23:37

These passages seem to portray genuine divine invitations that are not accepted.

If God's grace were always irresistible, critics argue, such descriptions would be difficult to explain.

The Nature of Drawing

Much of the disagreement centers on the meaning of God's drawing.

When Scripture says that the Father draws people to Christ, what exactly does that mean? (John 6:44)

One interpretation understands drawing as an effectual action that guarantees a response.

Another views drawing as a genuine invitation that may nevertheless be resisted.

Both perspectives acknowledge that salvation begins with God.

The disagreement concerns whether God's drawing necessarily produces faith or whether faith remains a response that can be refused.

This distinction may seem subtle, but it carries significant implications for how salvation is understood.

The Problem Both Views Attempt to Solve

Interestingly, both positions are attempting to protect important biblical truths.

Advocates of irresistible grace seek to protect God's sovereignty.

They wish to avoid any understanding of salvation that makes God dependent upon human decisions.

If salvation ultimately depends upon God's purpose, they reason, then God's saving work must succeed (Romans 9:16).

Those who reject irresistible grace seek to protect human responsibility and accountability.

They wish to preserve the numerous biblical calls to repentance, faith, and obedience (Mark 1:15; Acts 17:30).

If people are continually commanded to respond, they argue, then that response must remain meaningful.

Both concerns arise from Scripture itself. This is one reason the debate has persisted for centuries.

The disagreement is not between those who believe the Bible and those who reject it.

It is often between believers who emphasize different aspects of biblical teaching.

Grace and Human Response

One question repeatedly emerges within this discussion:

What role does human response play in salvation?

Scripture clearly teaches that faith is necessary (Acts 16:31).

The Gospel repeatedly calls people to repent and believe (Mark 1:15).

Yet Scripture also teaches that faith itself is connected to God's work (Ephesians 2:8–9; Philippians 2:13).

The relationship between divine action and human response remains one of the most challenging subjects in Christian theology.

Some Christians view faith as the result of regeneration.

Others view faith as the response through which regeneration occurs.

The debate concerning irresistible grace often intersects with these broader questions.

Areas of Agreement

Despite their disagreements, Christians on both sides generally agree on several important points.

They agree that salvation originates with God (Ephesians 2:8–9).

They agree that humanity cannot save itself (Romans 3:23–24).

They agree that God's grace is necessary (Ephesians 2:8–9).

They agree that Christ's work on the cross is the basis of salvation (Romans 5:8–11).

They agree that faith is essential (Hebrews 11:6).

These shared convictions are often more significant than the points of disagreement themselves.

Recognizing this common ground helps place the debate in its proper perspective.

Closing Reflection

The doctrine of irresistible grace illustrates why humility is necessary in theological discussion.

Scripture contains passages that strongly emphasize God's sovereignty in salvation (John 6:37; John 6:44; Romans 9:16).

Scripture also contains passages that emphasize human responsibility and response (Acts 7:51; Matthew 23:37; Mark 1:15).

Christians have attempted to reconcile these truths in different ways.

Some conclude that God's saving call always succeeds.

Others conclude that God's grace may be resisted.

Both seek to account for the biblical evidence.

The purpose of examining this doctrine is not merely to choose sides but to understand why sincere believers have reached different conclusions.

Whatever position one ultimately adopts, the discussion should lead to greater appreciation for the grace of God and greater humility regarding the limits of human understanding.

For salvation remains, above all else, a work of God's mercy (Titus 3:5).

And every believer stands equally dependent upon that mercy.

CHAPTER TEN

Election

Chosen by God

"According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love."
— Ephesians 1:4

The doctrine of election is one of the most discussed and debated subjects in Christian theology.

At its core, election concerns the question of God's choice.

Does God choose those who will be saved?

If so, on what basis does He make that choice?

Is election unconditional, resting entirely upon God's will, or is it connected in some way to God's foreknowledge of human faith?

These questions have occupied theologians, pastors, and ordinary believers for centuries. Entire traditions have formed around different answers, and the discussion remains one of the most significant areas of disagreement within Christianity.

Yet despite the controversy, the concept of election itself is undeniably biblical.

The question is not whether election exists.

The question is how it should be understood.

Election Throughout Scripture

The language of choosing appears throughout the Bible.

God chose Abraham from among the nations (Genesis 12:1–3).

God chose Israel as His covenant people (Deuteronomy 7:6–8).

God chose Moses to lead His people out of Egypt (Exodus 3:10).

God chose David to be king (1 Samuel 16:1–13).

God chose prophets to speak on His behalf (Jeremiah 1:5; Isaiah 6:8–9).

Divine selection is woven throughout the biblical narrative.

These examples demonstrate an important principle:

God often acts according to His own purposes rather than according to human expectations.

When Samuel searched for Israel's next king, he naturally focused on outward appearance and strength. God, however, chose David, the youngest and least likely candidate (1 Samuel 16:6–13).

Again and again, Scripture presents God as One who chooses according to wisdom that exceeds human understanding (Isaiah 55:8–9).

The debate concerning election arises when this principle is applied to salvation itself.

The Case for Unconditional Election

Those who advocate unconditional election argue that God's choice of individuals for salvation rests entirely upon His sovereign will.

According to this view, election is not based upon foreseen faith, good works, or future decisions. Rather, God's choice precedes and ultimately produces the faith of those who are saved.

Several passages are frequently cited in support of this understanding.

Paul writes in Ephesians that believers were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4–5).

Likewise, Romans speaks of God's purpose in election standing not because of human works but because of Him who calls (Romans 9:11–16).

The example of Jacob and Esau is often emphasized. Before either child had done good or evil, God declared His purposes concerning them (Romans 9:11–13).

Advocates of unconditional election see passages like these as evidence that salvation depends fundamentally upon God's choice rather than human action.

In this understanding, election magnifies grace because it removes any basis for boasting (Romans 3:27–28).

Salvation becomes entirely the work of God from beginning to end (Ephesians 2:8–9).

The Case for Conditional Election

Others interpret election differently.

They agree that election exists but argue that God's choice is connected to His foreknowledge.

According to this perspective, God knows beforehand who will respond to His grace through faith and elects them accordingly.

This view often draws support from passages that connect election and foreknowledge.

Peter addresses believers as those who are elect according to the foreknowledge of God (1 Peter 1:1–2).

Similarly, Romans speaks of those whom God foreknew being predestined (Romans 8:29–30).

Supporters of conditional election argue that these passages suggest God's election is not arbitrary but connected to His perfect knowledge of future human responses.

In this understanding, election remains entirely consistent with God's sovereignty because God's knowledge is perfect and complete.

At the same time, human responsibility remains meaningful because faith remains a genuine response to God's grace.

Corporate Election

A third approach focuses on what is often called corporate election.

Rather than viewing election primarily as the selection of specific individuals, this perspective emphasizes God's choice of a people.

Just as Israel was chosen as a nation (Deuteronomy 7:6–8), the Church is viewed as God's chosen community in Christ (Ephesians 1:4–5).

Individuals become participants in that chosen community through faith.

Proponents of this view note that many biblical references to election are addressed to groups rather than isolated individuals.

The emphasis falls upon God's plan to redeem a people for Himself rather than upon the eternal selection of particular persons.

While this view does not resolve every question surrounding election, it shifts the focus from individual selection to participation in God's covenant community.

Why the Debate Exists

The persistence of this debate arises because Scripture contains themes that seem to support multiple concerns simultaneously.

On one hand, Scripture repeatedly emphasizes God's sovereignty.

Salvation is described as God's work (Jonah 2:9). Grace originates with Him (Ephesians 2:8–9).

No one can boast before God (Romans 3:27–28).

On the other hand, Scripture consistently calls people to believe, repent, and respond (Mark 1:15; Acts 17:30).

The Gospel invitation is proclaimed broadly (Matthew 28:19–20).

Human beings are held accountable for their choices (Acts 17:30–31).

These themes create a tension that Christians have attempted to explain in different ways.

Some emphasize divine sovereignty. Others emphasize human responsibility.

Most seek to preserve both.

The challenge lies in determining how those truths fit together.

Election and Assurance

One reason this doctrine matters is because it influences how believers think about assurance.

For those who hold unconditional election, assurance often rests upon confidence in God's unchanging purpose.

If salvation originates entirely in God's choice, then believers can trust that His purposes will not fail (Romans 8:29–30).

Those who hold conditional election likewise find assurance, but they often emphasize confidence in God's faithfulness to His promises and the believer's ongoing trust in Christ (John 10:27–29).

Though these approaches differ, both ultimately seek assurance in God rather than in human merit.

Election and Evangelism

Critics have sometimes suggested that election undermines evangelism.

Historically, however, many of Christianity's most active missionaries strongly believed in election.

For them, election provided confidence rather than discouragement.

Because God had purposes to accomplish, they preached boldly (Acts 18:9–10).

Others argue that the universal call of the Gospel serves as motivation for evangelism because every person should be given the opportunity to respond (Matthew 28:19–20).

In practice, Christians on both sides have often engaged passionately in evangelism, missions, and discipleship.

The disagreement concerns the theological explanation behind salvation rather than the importance of proclaiming the Gospel.

Areas of Agreement

Despite significant disagreement, Christians who differ on election generally share several core convictions.

They agree that salvation is impossible apart from God's grace (Ephesians 2:8–9).

They agree that Christ's death and resurrection provide the basis for redemption (Romans 5:8–11).

They agree that faith is necessary (Hebrews 11:6).

They agree that God is both sovereign and just (Deuteronomy 32:4; Daniel 4:35).

They agree that the Gospel should be proclaimed to all people (Matthew 28:19–20).

These shared beliefs are substantial and should not be overlooked.

Closing Reflection

The doctrine of election illustrates the challenge of understanding truths that extend beyond the limits of human experience.

God's knowledge is perfect (Psalm 147:5).

His wisdom is complete (Romans 11:33).

His purposes cannot fail (Isaiah 46:9–10).

At the same time, Scripture continually addresses human beings as responsible participants in His plan.

Christians have proposed different explanations for how these realities relate to one another.

Some emphasize God's sovereign choice.

Others emphasize foreknowledge and human response.

Still others emphasize God's election of a covenant people.

Each position attempts to account for the biblical evidence.

The discussion is important because it concerns the nature of salvation itself.

Yet it should also inspire humility.

Election reminds believers that salvation ultimately originates with God, not with human achievement (Ephesians 2:8–9).

Whatever conclusions one reaches regarding the details of election, every Christian arrives at the same place:

Dependent upon the grace, mercy, and faithfulness of God.

And that common dependence should encourage gratitude and unity rather than pride and division.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Salvation

The Gift of God

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God."
— Ephesians 2:8

Few words carry greater significance within Christianity than the word salvation.

At its simplest, salvation refers to God's work of rescuing humanity from the consequences of sin and restoring people to fellowship with Himself (2 Corinthians 5:18–19). It stands at the center of the Christian message and forms the foundation upon which every other doctrine ultimately rests.

Without salvation, there is no reconciliation.

Without salvation, there is no redemption.

Without salvation, there is no restoration of what was lost through the fall.

Yet despite its central importance, Christians have often disagreed about various aspects of salvation. Questions arise concerning how salvation is received, how faith and works relate to one another, what role grace plays, and whether salvation can be lost.

Before examining those disagreements, it is important to understand what Christians generally mean when they speak of salvation.

The Problem of Sin

The biblical story of salvation begins with a problem.

Humanity was created for fellowship with God (Genesis 1:26–27; Genesis 3:8), yet sin disrupted that relationship (Genesis 3:1–24).

Sin is more than isolated acts of wrongdoing. It is a condition that affects every aspect of human existence. It distorts desires, corrupts relationships, clouds judgment, and separates humanity from God (Isaiah 59:2).

Throughout Scripture, sin is presented as a universal problem.

No nation escapes it.

No culture escapes it.

No individual escapes it.

As Paul writes:

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

The consequences of sin extend beyond personal guilt. Sin affects families, communities, institutions, entire societies, and churches. Its presence is visible throughout history in violence, injustice, pride, greed, hatred, and suffering.

Most importantly, sin creates a barrier between humanity and God (Isaiah 59:2).

A holy God cannot simply ignore evil.

Justice requires that sin be addressed.

Yet God's desire is not merely judgment. His desire is redemption (Ezekiel 33:11; John 3:16).

The story of salvation is therefore the story of how God addresses the problem of sin while remaining both just and merciful.

The Work of Christ

The heart of Christian salvation is found in Jesus Christ.

Throughout the Old Testament, sacrifices pointed toward the need for atonement. Animals were offered as symbols of substitution, illustrating that sin carried consequences.

These sacrifices, however, were never intended as the final solution (Hebrews 10:1–4).

They pointed forward to something greater.

In the New Testament, Christ is presented as the fulfillment of that promise.

Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus accomplishes what humanity could not accomplish for itself.

He lives without sin (Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22).

He willingly bears the consequences of sin (Isaiah 53:5–6; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

He offers Himself as a sacrifice.

He rises victorious over death (1 Corinthians 15:3–4, 54–57).

Through this work, reconciliation becomes possible (2 Corinthians 5:18–19).

The cross demonstrates both God's justice and God's mercy.

Justice is upheld because sin is addressed.

Mercy is revealed because God Himself provides the means of redemption.

Salvation by Grace

One of the clearest teachings of Scripture is that salvation is a gift of grace.

Human beings do not earn salvation through moral achievement, religious observance, or personal effort (Ephesians 2:8–9; Titus 3:5).

No amount of good works can erase sin.

No amount of personal discipline can create righteousness sufficient to stand before God.

Salvation originates with God.

It is offered because of His love, mercy, and grace (John 3:16; Titus 3:5).

This truth protects the Christian message from becoming a system of self-salvation.

If salvation could be earned, it would cease to be grace (Romans 11:6).

The emphasis upon grace reminds believers that redemption is ultimately a gift rather than an achievement.

Every Christian stands before God on the same ground.

None earn their place.

All depend upon mercy.

The Role of Faith

While salvation is a gift, Scripture repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of faith.

Faith is the means by which individuals receive what God has provided (Romans 5:1).

Faith involves trust.

It is more than intellectual agreement with certain facts. It includes reliance upon Christ and confidence in His work.

The New Testament repeatedly calls people to believe (Acts 16:31).

The Gospel invitation is not merely to acknowledge the existence of God but to place one's trust in Him.

Faith does not earn salvation.

Rather, faith receives salvation.

This distinction is important because it preserves both the necessity of faith and the gracious nature of redemption.

Faith and Works

The relationship between faith and works has long been a subject of theological discussion.

Some passages strongly emphasize salvation apart from works (Ephesians 2:8–9).

Others emphasize the necessity of obedience and good deeds (James 2:17–18).

At first glance, these teachings may appear contradictory.

Upon closer examination, however, many Christians understand them as addressing different aspects of the same reality.

Faith concerns the root of salvation.

Works concern the fruit of salvation.

Good works do not create salvation, but genuine faith naturally produces transformation (Ephesians 2:10).

A healthy tree bears fruit because it is alive (Matthew 7:17–18).

Likewise, a living faith produces evidence through action (James 2:17–18).

The disagreement among Christians often concerns how these truths should be explained rather than whether they exist.

Justification and Sanctification

Another important distinction involves the concepts of justification and sanctification.

Justification refers to a person's standing before God.

Through Christ, believers are declared righteous (Romans 5:1).

Their relationship with God is restored.

Sanctification refers to the ongoing process of spiritual growth.

Believers continue learning, maturing, and becoming more like Christ throughout their lives (2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 2:12–13).

Confusion sometimes arises when these two concepts are blended together.

Salvation includes both.

There is an initial act of reconciliation and an ongoing process of transformation.

Understanding this distinction helps explain why Christians continue struggling with weakness and imperfection even after coming to faith.

Salvation is both an event and a process.

Different Perspectives Within Christianity

Although Christians broadly agree concerning the necessity of Christ, grace, and faith, disagreements arise concerning the details of how salvation operates.

Some traditions emphasize God's sovereign initiative.

Others emphasize the human response of faith.

Some view salvation as a process involving participation in the life of the Church and the means of grace.

Others focus more heavily upon personal conversion and individual faith.

These differences have contributed to many of the divisions within Christianity.

Yet beneath those disagreements lies substantial common ground.

Most Christians affirm that salvation comes through Christ alone (John 14:6; Acts 4:12), is made possible by grace (Ephesians 2:8–9), and requires faith (Acts 16:31).

These shared convictions remain far more significant than the differences that surround them.

The Purpose of Salvation

Salvation is often discussed in terms of what believers are saved from.

Certainly Scripture teaches that salvation delivers people from sin, judgment, and separation from God (Romans 5:9–10).

Yet salvation also involves what believers are saved for.

They are saved for fellowship with God (2 Corinthians 5:18–19).

They are saved for transformation (Romans 8:29).

They are saved for service (Ephesians 2:10).

They are saved to become part of God's redeemed people (1 Peter 2:9–10).

Salvation is therefore not merely escape from punishment.

It is an entrance into a restored relationship.

God's purpose extends beyond forgiveness alone.

He intends to restore humanity to the purpose for which it was created.

Salvation and the Christian Life

Because salvation involves restoration, it transforms how believers live.

Faith affects priorities.

Grace affects relationships.

Forgiveness affects behavior.

Hope affects endurance.

The Christian life is not an attempt to earn salvation.

It is the response of those who have received it.

Believers seek obedience not to secure God's love but because they have already encountered it (John 14:15).

This distinction shapes the entire Christian experience.

Obedience becomes an expression of gratitude rather than a means of earning favor.

Closing Reflection

Salvation stands at the center of Christianity because it reveals the heart of God's redemptive purpose.

Through Christ, what was broken can be restored.

Through grace, what was lost can be recovered.

Through faith, humanity is invited into fellowship with God.

Christians may disagree concerning some of the details surrounding salvation.

They may debate the relationship between grace and free will, faith and works, justification and sanctification.

Yet all believers ultimately look to the same source of hope.

Not to themselves.

Not to their achievements.

Not to their understanding.

But to Jesus Christ.

For salvation is, above all else, the work of God on behalf of those who could never save themselves (Jonah 2:9).

And it is in that shared dependence upon His grace that Christians find their common ground.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Perseverance and Falling Away

Can Salvation Be Lost?

"He that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved."
— Matthew 24:13

Among the many questions Christians have debated throughout history, few are as personal as this one:

Can a believer lose salvation?

The question touches upon assurance, faithfulness, obedience, and the nature of God's saving work. It concerns not only theological systems but also the daily lives of believers who desire confidence in their relationship with God.

Some Christians believe that those who are truly saved will ultimately persevere in faith until the end.

Others believe that genuine believers may later abandon their faith and separate themselves from the salvation they once possessed.

Both positions appeal to Scripture.

Both seek to honor God's character.

Both desire to encourage faithful Christian living.

The disagreement centers on how certain passages should be understood and how God's promises relate to human responsibility.

The Doctrine of Perseverance

The doctrine commonly known as the Perseverance of the Saints teaches that those whom God truly saves will ultimately remain in faith.

This view is closely associated with Reformed theology, though similar beliefs exist in other traditions as well.

According to this understanding, salvation is not merely initiated by God but preserved by God. Because salvation originates in His sovereign purpose, it cannot ultimately fail (Romans 8:29–30).

Advocates often point to passages in which Jesus speaks of giving eternal life to His followers and declares that no one can snatch them from His hand (John 10:27–29).

Likewise, Paul expresses confidence that God will complete the good work He has begun in believers (Philippians 1:6).

These passages emphasize God's faithfulness and His ability to preserve His people.

From this perspective, those who permanently abandon the faith demonstrate that they were never truly converted, even if they outwardly appeared to be believers for a time (1 John 2:19).

The perseverance view therefore places great confidence in God's ability to sustain those who belong to Him.

The Doctrine of Falling Away

Others believe that Scripture teaches the genuine possibility of apostasy.

In this view, salvation remains a gift of grace, but believers retain the ability to reject God through persistent unbelief or deliberate abandonment of the faith.

Supporters of this perspective point to numerous warning passages throughout the New Testament.

The book of Hebrews contains strong warnings against falling away (Hebrews 6:4–6; Hebrews 10:26–29).

Jesus speaks of branches that do not remain in the vine (John 15:1–6).

Various passages urge believers to continue, remain, endure, and persevere (Colossians 1:21–23; Matthew 24:13).

For those who hold this position, such warnings appear to describe real dangers rather than merely hypothetical possibilities.

If falling away were impossible, they argue, the warnings would lose much of their force.

This perspective emphasizes the ongoing importance of faithfulness and continued trust in Christ.

The Purpose of Biblical Warnings

One of the central questions in this debate concerns the purpose of the warning passages found throughout Scripture.

Why do the apostles repeatedly exhort believers to remain faithful?

Those who support perseverance often argue that the warnings are one of the means God uses to preserve His people. True believers heed the warnings and continue in faith.

In this understanding, the warnings are genuine, but they ultimately accomplish God's purpose of keeping believers faithful (Philippians 2:12–13).

Those who support the possibility of apostasy see the warnings differently.

They understand them as describing real dangers that believers must avoid.

The warnings function much like caution signs along a dangerous road. Their purpose is to prevent disaster by alerting travelers to genuine risks.

Both interpretations seek to take the warnings seriously.

The disagreement concerns what those warnings imply about the possibility of falling away.

Eternal Security

Closely related to perseverance is the doctrine often called eternal security.

This teaching is frequently summarized by the phrase:

"Once saved, always saved."

While the phrase is widely used, it is not always defined consistently.

Some use it to mean that a genuine believer can never lose salvation because salvation depends entirely upon God's preserving grace (John 10:27–29).

Others use the phrase more loosely, creating misunderstandings about what the doctrine actually teaches.

Most proponents of eternal security do not believe that salvation grants permission for careless living or persistent rebellion.

Rather, they argue that those who are truly transformed by God's grace will demonstrate evidence of that transformation over time (James 2:17–18).

Thus, perseverance becomes evidence of genuine faith rather than the cause of salvation.

The Importance of Assurance

One reason this debate matters is because it affects how believers understand assurance.

Assurance refers to confidence in one's relationship with God.

Those who emphasize perseverance often find assurance in God's promises and His faithfulness.

Their confidence rests not in personal performance but in God's ability to preserve His people (John 10:27–29; Philippians 1:6).

Those who emphasize the possibility of falling away likewise find assurance, but they often place greater emphasis upon continuing faith and trust in Christ (Colossians 1:21–23).

In both cases, assurance ultimately depends upon God's grace rather than human perfection.

Neither position teaches that salvation is earned through flawless obedience.

The Example of Judas

The figure of Judas Iscariot frequently appears within this discussion.

Judas was one of Christ's disciples (Matthew 10:1–4).

He witnessed miracles.

He heard Christ's teaching.

Yet he ultimately betrayed Jesus (Matthew 26:14–16, 47–50).

The question is whether Judas represents a believer who fell away or a person who was never truly converted.

Different theological traditions answer that question differently.

For some, Judas illustrates the possibility of apostasy.

For others, Judas demonstrates that outward association with Christ is not necessarily evidence of genuine faith (John 6:64–71).

The discussion surrounding Judas reflects the broader challenge of interpreting difficult passages and examples within Scripture.

Perseverance in the Christian Life

Regardless of one's position, Scripture consistently encourages perseverance.

Believers are called to endure trials (James 1:2–4).

They are called to remain faithful (Revelation 2:10).

They are called to continue trusting God through difficulty and uncertainty.

The Christian life is often compared to a race (1 Corinthians 9:24–27; Hebrews 12:1–2).

Such imagery emphasizes endurance rather than momentary enthusiasm.

Faithfulness is not measured merely by how a person begins but also by how he continues.

This emphasis on perseverance is shared by Christians across theological traditions.

Whether perseverance is viewed as evidence of salvation or as a condition of remaining in salvation, believers are consistently encouraged to endure.

Areas of Agreement

Despite their disagreement, Christians on both sides generally affirm several important truths.

They agree that salvation originates with God's grace (Ephesians 2:8–9).

They agree that Christ alone provides the basis for redemption (Acts 4:12).

They agree that faith is necessary (Hebrews 11:6).

They agree that believers should pursue holiness and faithfulness (1 Peter 1:15–16).

They agree that God's promises are trustworthy (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2).

These common convictions are often overlooked during debates.

Yet they represent significant areas of shared belief.

Closing Reflection

The debate concerning perseverance and falling away arises because Scripture contains both promises and warnings.

God promises to preserve His people (John 10:27–29; Romans 8:29–30).

At the same time, believers are repeatedly warned to remain faithful (Hebrews 6:4–6; Colossians 1:21–23).

Some Christians conclude that God's preserving grace guarantees perseverance.

Others conclude that believers retain the ability to abandon the faith.

Both positions seek to account for the biblical evidence.

Both attempt to honor God's character.

Both encourage believers toward faithfulness.

Whatever conclusion one reaches, the discussion should produce humility rather than arrogance.

No believer perseveres through personal strength alone.

Every Christian depends daily upon God's grace, mercy, and sustaining power (Philippians 2:12–13).

The Christian life is not a journey maintained by human effort.

It is a life lived through continual dependence upon God.

And whether one emphasizes perseverance or the danger of falling away, all believers can agree that faithfulness remains possible only because God remains faithful (2 Timothy 2:13).

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Nature and Structure of the Church

What Is the Church?

"Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular."
— 1 Corinthians 12:27

Among the many disagreements that have contributed to division within Christianity, few have had a greater impact than differing views of the Church itself.

Questions concerning salvation often affect personal theology, but questions concerning the Church shape entire communities, denominations, and traditions.

What exactly is the Church?

Is it primarily an institution, an organization, a visible body, or a spiritual fellowship?

Who belongs to it?

How should it be governed?

What authority has God entrusted to it?

Christians have answered these questions in different ways throughout history, and those differences have played a significant role in the development of the various branches of Christendom.

Before considering those disagreements, it is important to begin with what Scripture clearly teaches.

The Church as the Body of Christ

One of the most common biblical descriptions of the Church is that of a body (1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Romans 12:4–5).

Paul repeatedly uses this imagery to explain the relationship between believers and Christ.

Christ is presented as the head of the body (Ephesians 1:22–23; Colossians 1:18).

Believers are presented as members of that body (1 Corinthians 12:12–27).

Each member possesses a unique function, yet all are connected through their relationship to Christ.

This image emphasizes unity amid diversity.

Not every believer serves the same role.

Not every believer possesses the same gifts.

Not every believer performs the same functions.

Yet all belong to the same body.

The health of the body depends upon its members functioning together under the leadership of its head.

This imagery also reminds believers that the Church is more than an institution.

It is a living community united through Christ.

The Church as a Family

Scripture frequently describes believers as members of God's household (Ephesians 2:19).

God is called Father (Matthew 6:9).

Believers are called brothers and sisters and fellow heirs with Christ (Romans 8:14–17; Hebrews 2:11–12).

The Church is presented as a family gathered around a common relationship with Christ.

This description highlights the relational nature of the Church.

Christianity was never intended to be practiced in complete isolation.

Believers are called to encourage one another, serve one another, bear one another's burdens, and grow together (Galatians 6:2; Hebrews 10:24–25).

The Church therefore exists not merely as a collection of individuals but as a community of faith.

This understanding helps explain why division within the Church is so significant.

Division within a family always carries pain because it disrupts relationships that were intended to reflect unity.

The Visible and Invisible Church

One distinction often made by theologians is the difference between the visible and invisible Church.

The visible Church consists of the communities, congregations, and institutions that can be observed throughout the world.

The invisible Church refers to all true believers known fully by God.

While human beings see outward affiliation, God sees the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).

This distinction helps explain how faithful believers may exist across different traditions and denominations.

It recognizes that organizational boundaries do not necessarily define the full extent of God's people.

At the same time, Scripture consistently presents believers as gathering together in visible communities of worship, fellowship, teaching, and service (Acts 2:42–47; Hebrews 10:24–25).

The Church is therefore both visible and spiritual.

Authority Within the Church

One of the most significant areas of disagreement concerns authority.

Who has the right to teach doctrine?

Who has the authority to interpret Scripture?

How should disputes be resolved?

Different Christian traditions answer these questions differently.

Some emphasize centralized authority.

Others emphasize local authority.

Still others seek a balance between the two.

The disagreement is not merely organizational.

It affects how doctrines are preserved, how leaders are selected, and how decisions are made.

Throughout history, differing answers to these questions have contributed significantly to division within Christianity.

Yet Scripture consistently presents Christ as the ultimate authority over His Church (Matthew 28:18–20; Ephesians 1:22–23).

All other authority exists under His lordship.

Historical Models of Church Government

Three major approaches to church governance have emerged throughout Christian history.

The first is commonly called the episcopal model.

In this structure, authority is exercised through bishops who oversee multiple congregations.

Supporters often point to the development of church oversight visible in the pastoral epistles and the early post-apostolic Church (1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9).

The second is the presbyterian model.

Here, authority is exercised through groups of elders who govern collectively.

This approach draws support from the repeated New Testament pattern of churches being led by a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; James 5:14).

The third is the congregational model.

This approach places significant authority within the local congregation itself.

Advocates often point to passages where entire congregations participate in important decisions (Acts 6:1–6; Matthew 18:15–20).

Each model seeks biblical support.

Each attempts to preserve order, accountability, and faithfulness.

Yet the differing conclusions reached by Christians have contributed to the development of distinct traditions.

Areas of Agreement

Despite differences regarding church structure, authority, and governance, Christians across traditions share several important convictions regarding the Church.

They agree that Christ is the head of the Church (Ephesians 1:22–23; Colossians 1:18).

They agree that believers are called into fellowship with one another (Acts 2:42–47).

They agree that the Church exists to worship God, proclaim the Gospel, disciple believers, and serve others (Matthew 28:18–20).

They agree that believers are called to gather together rather than live in isolation (Hebrews 10:24–25).

And they agree that the Church belongs ultimately to Christ rather than to any human leader or institution (Matthew 16:18).

These shared convictions provide a foundation upon which meaningful discussion can occur even when significant differences remain.

Closing Reflection

The Church is simultaneously visible and spiritual.

It is an institution and a family.

It possesses organization, yet it remains more than an organization.

Throughout history, Christians have developed different understandings of how the Church should be governed and how authority should function within it. These differences have contributed to both growth and division.

Yet beneath those disagreements lies a truth that every Christian tradition affirms:

The Church belongs to Christ.

He is its head (Colossians 1:18).

He is its foundation (Ephesians 2:20).

He is its Lord (Philippians 2:9–11).

If the Church is ever to move toward greater reconciliation, it will not be accomplished merely by resolving every doctrinal disagreement. It will require recovering a shared understanding that, despite our differences, we belong to one body under one Shepherd (John 10:14–16; Ephesians 4:4–6).

For the purpose of the Church is not merely to preserve institutions.

Its purpose is to proclaim Christ, nurture His people, and bear witness to the kingdom of God (Matthew 28:18–20).

And wherever believers gather under the lordship of Christ, submit themselves to His Word, and seek unity with one another, the Church moves closer to the pattern God intended from the beginning.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Doctrinal Authority

When Christians Disagree

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."
— 2 Timothy 3:16

From the earliest days of Christianity, believers have faced disagreements concerning doctrine.

Questions arose regarding the nature of Christ, the requirements for church membership, the role of the Mosaic Law, spiritual gifts, church leadership, salvation, and countless other subjects (Acts 15:1–29; Galatians 2:11–14). While Christians often agree on many foundational truths, differences in interpretation have repeatedly emerged.

When these disagreements occur, an important question follows:

Who has the authority to decide what is true?

Is authority found solely in Scripture?

Does church tradition possess authority?

What role do church leaders, councils, and historical teachings play?

How should believers approach disagreements when sincere Christians reach different conclusions?

These questions have shaped Christian history and remain central to many of the divisions that exist today.

Scripture as the Foundation

Nearly every core Christian tradition affirms the authority of Scripture.

The Bible is regarded as God's revelation and serves as the primary source for Christian doctrine (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Through Scripture, believers learn about God's character, humanity's condition, the work of Christ, and the hope of redemption.

Because Scripture occupies such a central role, most doctrinal discussions ultimately return to the question:

"What does Scripture teach?"

The challenge, however, is not simply recognizing Scripture's authority.

The challenge is determining how Scripture should be interpreted.

Different believers often approach the same passages and arrive at different conclusions.

The existence of these differences has led Christians to develop various approaches to doctrinal authority.

Scripture Alone

One of the most influential approaches is commonly summarized by the Latin phrase *Sola Scriptura*, meaning "Scripture alone."

This principle became especially prominent during the Protestant Reformation.

Advocates argue that Scripture alone functions as the final and infallible authority for Christian doctrine (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Church leaders, traditions, and councils may provide valuable guidance, but all human authorities remain subject to Scripture (Acts 17:11).

According to this view, any doctrine that cannot be supported by Scripture should be approached with caution.

The strength of this approach lies in its commitment to grounding doctrine in God's revealed Word rather than human tradition.

Supporters believe it protects the Church from elevating human authority above divine revelation.

Scripture and Tradition

Other Christian traditions affirm the authority of Scripture while also emphasizing the importance of tradition.

In this understanding, the teachings, practices, and interpretations handed down through the historic Church serve an important role in preserving and understanding the faith (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

Tradition is not viewed as separate from Scripture but as a means through which Scripture has been understood and applied throughout Christian history.

Supporters of this perspective often point out that the Church existed before the New Testament was completed.

The early Church preserved apostolic teaching, recognized the biblical canon, and transmitted the faith across generations (Acts 2:42; 2 Timothy 2:2).

Because of this, tradition is seen as an important companion to Scripture rather than a rival authority.

The Role of Church Councils

Throughout Christian history, major doctrinal controversies have often been addressed through church councils.

Gatherings of church leaders sought to examine disputed teachings, compare them with Scripture, and provide guidance for the broader Church.

Some of the most influential councils addressed questions concerning the Trinity, the nature of Christ, and other foundational doctrines.

These councils helped establish doctrinal clarity during times of significant disagreement.

The question, however, remains:

What level of authority should such councils possess?

Some traditions regard ecumenical councils as carrying substantial authority.

Others view them as valuable but ultimately subordinate to Scripture.

The differing answers contribute to ongoing disagreements concerning doctrinal authority.

Many Christians point to the Jerusalem Council as an early example of believers gathering to resolve doctrinal disputes through discussion, Scripture, testimony, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:1–29).

The Challenge of Interpretation

One reason doctrinal disagreements persist is because interpretation is unavoidable.

Every reader approaches Scripture with certain assumptions, experiences, and perspectives.

Language, culture, history, and literary context all influence interpretation.

Two sincere believers may read the same passage and emphasize different aspects of its meaning.

This reality does not mean Scripture is unreliable.

Rather, it reminds us that human understanding remains limited (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Interpretation requires humility, careful study, and a willingness to learn from others (Proverbs 9:9; James 1:19).

Recognizing this limitation helps explain why Christians continue to debate doctrines despite sharing the same Scriptures.

The Danger of Tradition Without Scripture

Scripture contains repeated warnings against elevating human traditions above God's commands.

Religious traditions can provide wisdom and continuity, but they can also become obstacles when they are treated as equal to or greater than divine revelation.

Jesus frequently challenged religious leaders who allowed traditions to obscure the true intent of God's Word (Mark 7:8–13; Matthew 15:3–9).

This serves as an important reminder.

Tradition is valuable when it helps believers understand and apply Scripture.

It becomes problematic when it replaces Scripture or shields itself from biblical examination.

Every tradition, no matter how old or respected, should remain open to evaluation in light of God's Word (Acts 17:11).

The Danger of Scripture Without Community

At the same time, there are dangers in approaching Scripture entirely alone.

Individual interpretation without accountability can lead to error.

History demonstrates that sincere individuals can reach highly unusual conclusions when isolated from the broader Christian community.

The Church provides collective wisdom accumulated across generations.

Pastors, teachers, theologians, and fellow believers all contribute valuable perspectives (Ephesians 4:11–13).

While no human authority is infallible, Christians benefit from learning alongside others rather than attempting to interpret everything independently.

Healthy doctrinal study often involves both personal engagement with Scripture and participation within the larger body of Christ (Hebrews 10:24–25).

Essential and Secondary Doctrines

An important aspect of doctrinal authority involves distinguishing between essential and secondary doctrines.

Not every disagreement carries equal significance.

Certain beliefs stand at the center of Christianity.

The identity of Christ (John 1:1–14; Colossians 2:9).

The reality of His death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3–4).

The necessity of grace (Ephesians 2:8–9).

The authority and sovereignty of God (Isaiah 46:9–10).

These doctrines shape the foundation of the faith.

Other disagreements, while important, may not carry the same weight.

Questions concerning prophetic timelines, the details of God's sovereign work in salvation, and various matters of church practice often fall into this category.

Recognizing this distinction can help believers maintain perspective during doctrinal discussions.

Not every disagreement should result in division.

Authority and Humility

One of the recurring themes throughout this discussion has been humility.

The discussion of authority brings that theme into sharp focus.

People often become most certain precisely where Scripture is least explicit.

History demonstrates that many doctrines once defended with absolute confidence later required refinement or correction, like end-times predictions.

This does not mean truth is unknowable.

It means that human understanding remains imperfect (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Authority should produce responsibility rather than pride.

Those who teach, lead, and interpret Scripture bear a serious responsibility before God (James 3:1).

The pursuit of truth should therefore be accompanied by humility, patience, and a willingness to learn.

Closing Reflection

The question of doctrinal authority lies at the heart of many divisions within Christianity.

Christians agree that Scripture is authoritative.

We disagree about how Scripture relates to tradition, church leadership, councils, and historical interpretation.

Some emphasize Scripture alone as the final authority.

Others emphasize Scripture interpreted within the context of the historic Church.

Both seek to preserve faithfulness to God's revelation.

The challenge is not merely determining where authority resides.

The challenge is exercising that authority wisely and humbly.

For authority exists not to elevate individuals or institutions but to serve the truth.

And the ultimate purpose of doctrinal authority is not victory in debate.

It is helping believers know God more faithfully, follow Christ more closely, and live according to His revealed will.

Wherever authority accomplishes those purposes, it serves the Church well.

Wherever it loses sight of those purposes, it risks becoming an end in itself.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Procession of the Holy Spirit

A Small Phrase with Great Consequences

"But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me."
— John 15:26

Among the many disagreements that have contributed to division within Christianity, few appear as small on the surface as the question of the Holy Spirit's procession.

At first glance, the disagreement seems highly technical.

Does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father alone? Or does the Holy Spirit proceed from both the Father and the Son?

To many Christians, this may seem like a minor distinction.

Yet this question played a significant role in the growing tensions between the Eastern and Western churches and eventually became one of the contributing factors to the Great Schism of 1054.

Because the disagreement concerns the nature of God Himself, Christians have historically treated it with great seriousness.

The Origin of the Dispute

The controversy centers upon a phrase commonly known by its Latin name, *Filioque*, meaning "and the Son."

The original Nicene Creed confessed belief in the Holy Spirit and stated that He proceeds from the Father. This language reflected Christ's own words regarding the Spirit (John 15:26).

Over time, churches in the West added the phrase *and the Son* so that the creed declared that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

The Eastern churches rejected this addition.

Part of the disagreement concerned theology.

Part of the disagreement concerned authority.

Even among those who may have agreed substantially in doctrine, many questioned whether one portion of the Church possessed the authority to alter a creed accepted by the whole Church.

Thus, the controversy involved not only the Holy Spirit but also broader questions of church authority and unity.

The Western Position

The Western tradition, represented primarily by the Roman Catholic Church and later many Protestant churches, teaches that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son.

Supporters of this view point to several passages that appear to connect the Spirit closely with both the Father and Christ.

Jesus describes the Spirit as being sent by the Father in His name (John 14:26).

He also speaks of sending the Spirit Himself (John 15:26; John 16:7).

Paul refers to the Spirit as both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9–11; Galatians 4:6).

From these passages, Western theologians concluded that the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son together.

They argue that this understanding preserves the unity between the Father and the Son and reflects the full testimony of Scripture regarding the Spirit's relationship to both.

The Eastern Position

The Eastern Orthodox tradition affirms the full divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit but maintains that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone.

Supporters of this position place particular emphasis upon Christ's statement:

"But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me" (John 15:26).

Because Christ specifically says that the Spirit proceeds from the Father, Eastern theologians argue that this language should be preserved without addition.

They maintain that the Father is the unique source within the Trinity and that the Spirit's procession from the Father alone preserves this distinction.

At the same time, they affirm that the Son sends the Spirit into the world and works in complete unity with Him (John 16:7).

Thus, the disagreement is not about whether the Son is divine.

It concerns how the eternal relationships within the Trinity should be described.

Areas of Agreement

Despite the historical significance of this controversy, it is important to recognize how much agreement exists between the two positions.

Both affirm the doctrine of the Trinity (Matthew 28:19).

Both affirm the full deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19; John 1:1–14; Acts 5:3–4).

Both affirm that the Spirit is not a created being.

Both affirm that the Spirit works in perfect unity with the Father and the Son (John 14:16–17, 26).

Both affirm the Spirit's role in regeneration, sanctification, guidance, and empowerment (John 3:5–8; Romans 8:13–16; Galatians 5:16–25).

The disagreement concerns the precise language used to describe the Spirit's eternal relationship within the Godhead.

While that question is important, the amount of common ground is often overlooked.

Why This Matters

At first glance, some believers may wonder why such a discussion matters at all.

The answer is that Christians desire to speak accurately about God.

If Scripture reveals something concerning the nature of the Trinity, believers naturally wish to understand and preserve that truth.

The controversy therefore reflects a sincere effort to remain faithful to divine revelation.

At the same time, this debate also serves as an example of how theological disagreements can become magnified when questions of authority and identity become attached to them.

What began as a discussion concerning the procession of the Holy Spirit eventually became intertwined with larger disputes between East and West.

As a result, a relatively narrow doctrinal question contributed to a much broader division.

A Question of Humility

The doctrine of the Trinity contains mysteries that extend beyond the full grasp of human understanding.

Christians can describe what Scripture reveals, but there are limits to how deeply finite minds can comprehend the inner relationships of an infinite God (Isaiah 55:8–9; Romans 11:33–34).

For this reason, discussions concerning the Trinity should be approached with particular humility.

Scripture clearly teaches that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God (Matthew 28:19; John 1:1–14; Acts 5:3–4).

Scripture clearly teaches distinction within the Godhead (Matthew 3:16–17; John 14:16–17).

Yet many details concerning these relationships remain profound mysteries.

Recognizing those limits should encourage carefulness and charity in theological discussion.

Closing Reflection

The disagreement concerning the procession of the Holy Spirit has occupied Christian thinkers for centuries.

The Western Church teaches that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

The Eastern Church teaches that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone.

Both positions seek to honor Scripture.

Both seek to preserve the doctrine of the Trinity.

Both affirm the full deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Because this controversy contributed to one of the most significant divisions in Christian history, it deserves careful consideration.

Yet it also serves as a reminder that Christians often share far more common ground than their disagreements suggest.

Whatever conclusion one ultimately reaches, the central truth remains unchanged:

The Father is God.

The Son is God.

The Holy Spirit is God.

And through the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, believers are brought into fellowship with the one true God (2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 2:18).

For that reason, discussions concerning the Trinity should ultimately lead not merely to debate, but to united worship.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Baptism and the Lord's Supper

Visible Signs of Invisible Truths

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."
— Matthew 28:19

Among the practices observed throughout Christianity, few are as universal as baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Across denominations, cultures, and centuries, Christians have continued to baptize believers and gather around the communion table. These practices connect modern believers to the earliest generations of the Church and serve as visible expressions of spiritual realities.

Yet despite their widespread acceptance, significant disagreements exist concerning their meaning, purpose, and proper administration.

What does baptism accomplish?

Who should be baptized?

What occurs during the Lord's Supper?

How should believers understand Christ's presence within these ordinances?

These questions have contributed to some of the most enduring divisions within Christian history.

The Purpose of Baptism

Baptism appears throughout the New Testament as a public expression of faith and identification with Christ (Acts 2:41; Acts 8:36–38).

Following His resurrection, Jesus commanded His disciples to make disciples of all nations and baptize them (Matthew 28:19–20).

The book of Acts repeatedly records new believers being baptized after embracing the Gospel (Acts 2:41; Acts 8:12; Acts 16:30–33).

Because baptism occupies such a prominent place within Scripture, nearly all Christian traditions recognize its importance.

The disagreement concerns what baptism signifies and accomplishes.

Some view baptism primarily as an outward testimony of an inward faith that has already occurred.

Others view baptism as a means through which God conveys grace and incorporates believers into the covenant community.

These differing understandings influence how baptism is practiced and who receives it.

Believer's Baptism

One position, often associated with Baptist and various evangelical traditions, teaches that baptism should be administered only to those who have personally professed faith in Christ.

Supporters of this view emphasize the New Testament pattern in which individuals hear the Gospel, believe, and then are baptized (Acts 2:41; Acts 8:12; Acts 18:8).

Because faith precedes baptism in these examples, they conclude that baptism should follow a conscious decision to trust Christ.

In this understanding, baptism serves as a public declaration of faith and obedience.

It symbolizes identification with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3–4).

The act itself does not save.

Rather, it testifies to a salvation already received through faith (Ephesians 2:8–9).

This view places significant emphasis on personal belief and individual commitment.

Infant Baptism

Other Christian traditions practice infant baptism.

Supporters of infant baptism often point to the covenantal themes that run throughout Scripture.

Just as infants participated in the covenant community of Israel through circumcision (Genesis 17:9–14), they argue that children of believing families may participate in the covenant community through baptism.

Some also point to household baptisms recorded in the New Testament (Acts 16:15; Acts 16:30–33; 1 Corinthians 1:16), though Christians differ regarding how these passages should be interpreted.

In this understanding, baptism functions not primarily as a testimony of personal faith but as a sign of inclusion within God's covenant people.

Personal faith remains necessary, but baptism is administered before that faith fully develops.

Different traditions explain the significance of infant baptism in different ways, yet they generally agree that baptism marks entrance into the visible community of faith.

Baptismal Regeneration

Another area of disagreement concerns whether baptism itself plays a role in salvation.

Some traditions teach what is often called baptismal regeneration.

According to this view, God works through baptism in a unique and significant way, applying grace to the individual and participating in the process of salvation.

Supporters point to passages that connect baptism with forgiveness, cleansing, or new life (Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:21).

Others interpret those passages differently.

They argue that salvation is received through faith (Ephesians 2:8–9; Romans 5:1) and that baptism serves as a symbol of what God has already accomplished.

For them, baptism remains important because Christ commanded it (Matthew 28:19–20), but it does not itself produce regeneration.

This disagreement illustrates how Christians can affirm the importance of baptism while differing concerning its exact function.

Methods of Baptism

Christians have also differed concerning the proper method of baptism.

Some traditions practice immersion, in which the individual is fully submerged in water.

Others practice pouring or sprinkling.

Advocates of immersion often point to the symbolism of burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3–4), as well as the apparent meaning of the Greek word commonly translated as "baptize."

Supporters of pouring or sprinkling emphasize the symbolic cleansing associated with water (Ezekiel 36:25; Hebrews 10:22) and note that Scripture does not explicitly require one exclusive method.

While this disagreement has often been significant within certain traditions, many Christians view the mode of baptism as secondary to the meaning it represents.

The Lord's Supper

The second major ordinance observed throughout Christianity is the Lord's Supper.

Instituted by Jesus during His final meal with His disciples (Matthew 26:26–29; Luke 22:19–20), the practice serves as a continual reminder of Christ's sacrifice.

Believers gather to remember His death, proclaim His work, and anticipate His return (1 Corinthians 11:23–26).

Bread and wine—or bread and the fruit of the vine—serve as symbols connected to Christ's body and blood.

Although Christians broadly agree concerning the importance of the Lord's Supper, they have developed very different explanations concerning what occurs during the observance.

The Presence of Christ

Perhaps the most significant disagreement concerns Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper.

The Roman Catholic tradition teaches that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ in a profound sacramental sense while retaining their outward appearance.

This doctrine is commonly known as transubstantiation.

Supporters often point to Christ's words:

"This is my body" (Matthew 26:26).

Other traditions reject this explanation while still affirming a special spiritual presence of Christ within the meal.

Many Reformed traditions teach that Christ is spiritually present and that believers genuinely commune with Him through faith during the observance (1 Corinthians 10:16).

Still other traditions view the meal primarily as a memorial.

In this understanding, the elements remain symbolic reminders of Christ's sacrifice rather than vehicles of a unique spiritual presence.

These differing views have contributed to some of the most significant divisions within Christian history.

The Purpose of Communion

Despite disagreements concerning Christ's presence, Christians generally agree on several purposes of the Lord's Supper.

It serves as a remembrance of Christ's death (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24–25).

It proclaims the Gospel (1 Corinthians 11:26).

It encourages self-examination (1 Corinthians 11:28).

It strengthens fellowship among believers (1 Corinthians 10:16–17).

It directs attention toward Christ's return (1 Corinthians 11:26).

The observance therefore functions both individually and collectively.

Believers remember Christ personally while participating together as members of His body.

Unity and Division at the Table

Ironically, one of the practices intended to symbolize unity has often become a source of division.

Throughout history, Christians have disagreed concerning who may participate in communion, how frequently it should be observed, and what theological understanding should accompany it.

Yet the New Testament consistently emphasizes the communal nature of the meal.

Believers gather not merely as individuals but as members of one body (1 Corinthians 10:16–17).

This emphasis serves as an important reminder.

The Lord's Supper points beyond doctrinal debates toward the unity believers share in Christ.

Areas of Agreement

Despite significant differences, Christians generally agree on several foundational truths regarding baptism and the Lord's Supper.

They agree that both practices were instituted by Christ (Matthew 28:19–20; Luke 22:19–20).

They agree that both remain important for the life of the Church.

They agree that these ordinances point believers toward the Gospel.

They agree that participation should be approached with reverence and faith (1 Corinthians 11:27–29).

These common convictions provide substantial ground for mutual understanding even amid disagreement.

Closing Reflection

The debates surrounding baptism and the Lord's Supper reveal how sincere believers can arrive at different conclusions while studying the same Scriptures.

Some view baptism primarily as a testimony of faith.

Others view it as a covenantal sign through which God works.

Some understand communion as involving Christ's unique sacramental presence.

Others understand it primarily as remembrance.

Each position seeks to honor Scripture and preserve important theological truths.

The existence of these disagreements should encourage humility.

These practices were given to draw believers closer to Christ, not merely to provide topics for debate.

Whatever position one adopts, baptism and the Lord's Supper ultimately direct attention toward the same reality:

The saving work of Jesus Christ.

They remind believers of His death, resurrection, covenant, and promises (Romans 6:3–4; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26).

And through these visible signs, the Church continues to proclaim the Gospel from generation to generation.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Spiritual Gifts

Gifts Given by the Holy Spirit

"Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit."
— 1 Corinthians 12:4

One of the more visible disagreements within modern Christianity concerns the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament clearly teaches that God grants spiritual gifts to believers (1 Corinthians 12:4–11; Romans 12:4–8; Ephesians 4:11–13). These gifts are intended to serve the Church, strengthen the faith of believers, and accomplish God's purposes in the world (1 Corinthians 12:7; Ephesians 4:12).

The question is not whether spiritual gifts exist.

The question is how they function today and to what extent they remain active.

Among Christians, two primary viewpoints have emerged.

The first is commonly called Continuationism, which teaches that the spiritual gifts described in the New Testament continue to operate throughout the Church age.

The second is known as Cessationism, which teaches that certain miraculous gifts largely ceased after the foundational period of the apostles.

Both positions appeal to Scripture.

Both seek to honor God's Word.

Both attempt to explain the apparent difference between the miraculous events frequently recorded in Scripture and the reality most Christians observe today.

The Spiritual Gifts Described in Scripture

Paul provides one of the clearest lists of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10.

These include gifts such as wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:8–10).

Additional gifts are listed elsewhere, including teaching, leadership, service, encouragement, generosity, and mercy (Romans 12:6–8).

The existence of these gifts is not generally disputed.

Rather, Christians disagree regarding their purpose, duration, and prevalence.

Some gifts appear ordinary in nature, such as teaching, leadership, and encouragement (Romans 12:6–8).

Others appear miraculous, such as healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues (1 Corinthians 12:8–10).

It is primarily these miraculous gifts that have generated debate.

The Continuationist Position

Continuationists believe that the gifts of the Spirit continue to operate within the Church today.

Supporters of this view often point to Christ's words that signs would accompany those who believe (Mark 16:17–18).

They argue that Scripture nowhere explicitly teaches that the gifts would cease prior to Christ's return.

The events of Pentecost are frequently cited in support of this position.

Acts records that people from many nations heard the disciples speaking in their own languages through the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–11).

Peter then declared that the promise extended beyond that immediate generation and was intended for those whom the Lord would call (Acts 2:38–39).

Continuationists also point to Paul's instructions regarding tongues in 1 Corinthians 14.

Rather than forbidding the practice, Paul provides guidance for its proper use within the Church and concludes:

"Forbid not to speak with tongues" (1 Corinthians 14:39).

Additionally, many continuationists interpret 1 Corinthians 13:8–10 as teaching that gifts such as prophecy and tongues will cease only when perfection comes.

Because believers still await the return of Christ and the completion of God's redemptive plan, they conclude that the gifts remain available to the Church.

The Cessationist Position

Cessationists generally believe that miraculous gifts served a unique purpose during the apostolic age and largely ceased after the Church was established.

Supporters of this view frequently point to Hebrews 2:3–4, where signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit are associated with the confirmation of the apostolic message.

They also point to Paul's statement concerning *"the signs of an apostle"* (2 Corinthians 12:12), arguing that miraculous manifestations served as divine confirmation of apostolic authority.

From this perspective, the gifts were never intended to be universally possessed by all believers.

Rather, they were distributed according to God's purposes during a unique foundational period in the Church's history (Ephesians 2:20).

Some cessationists interpret *"the perfect"* in 1 Corinthians 13:8–10 as referring to the completion of God's revealed truth, often associated with the completion of the New Testament canon.

Others simply argue that the passage permits the possibility that certain gifts would cease after their foundational purpose had been fulfilled.

John 9:4 is sometimes cited as well.

After performing a miraculous healing, Jesus speaks of a coming time when no one can work:

"The night cometh, when no man can work" (John 9:4).

Some interpret this as suggesting that miraculous works may not occur with the same frequency throughout every period of history.

Acts 19:1–6 is also referenced because the believers in that passage received certain gifts after the laying on of hands by the Apostle Paul.

Some cessationists view this as evidence of a close relationship between miraculous gifts and apostolic ministry.

A Future Outpouring?

An additional consideration appears in the prophecies of Joel and their citation in Acts.

Joel prophesies a future outpouring of God's Spirit upon all flesh (Joel 2:28–32).

Peter cites this prophecy during Pentecost to explain the events taking place before the crowd (Acts 2:16–21).

Some Christians believe these passages describe not only the beginning of the Church but also future manifestations of the Spirit associated with the Day of the Lord.

This interpretation attempts to explain why spiritual gifts may appear prominently at certain moments in redemptive history while remaining less visible during others.

Others understand Pentecost itself as the primary fulfillment of Joel's prophecy.

The discussion continues because Scripture does not explicitly settle every question concerning the timing and scope of future outpourings.

Why This Debate Exists

One reason this disagreement persists is because Christians observe an apparent difference between the world of the New Testament and the world they experience today.

The book of Acts records dramatic miracles, public healings, prophetic revelations, and supernatural manifestations (Acts 2–5; Acts 19:11–12).

Many believers look around the modern Church and do not observe such events with the same frequency.

This creates an understandable tension.

Some conclude that the gifts have largely ceased.

Others conclude that the gifts remain available but may appear less frequently because of God's present purposes, spiritual conditions, or other factors.

In both cases, the desire is often the same:

To reconcile personal experience with biblical teaching.

As this discussion observes, the concern frequently arises from sincere believers wondering whether the apparent absence of miraculous gifts means something is lacking in themselves or their churches.

The Purpose of Spiritual Gifts

Perhaps the most important observation is that spiritual gifts were never presented as spectacles or spiritual entertainment.

Throughout Scripture, God performs miracles for specific purposes.

Miracles confirm His message (Hebrews 2:3–4).

They authenticate His messengers (2 Corinthians 12:12).

They reveal His power (Acts 3:1–10).

They advance His redemptive plan (Acts 8:4–8).

In the apostolic age, spiritual gifts served as a powerful catalyst for the establishment of the Church and the confirmation of apostolic testimony (Ephesians 2:20).

This raises an important question:

If gifts always serve a purpose, what purpose would they serve today?

Some Christians answer that the same purpose continues.

Others answer that the foundational purpose has already been accomplished and now the Scriptures preserve and record that purpose.

The disagreement centers not on God's power but on how God chooses to exercise that power in the present age.

Areas of Agreement

Despite the disagreement, Christians on both sides generally affirm several important truths.

They agree that spiritual gifts originate from the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4–11).

They agree that God remains fully capable of performing miracles (Luke 1:37).

They agree that gifts exist for the benefit of the Church rather than personal exaltation (1 Corinthians 12:7).

They agree that all spiritual gifts should operate under the authority of God's Word (1 Corinthians 14:26–33).

They agree that love remains more important than any spiritual gift (1 Corinthians 13:1–13).

These shared convictions are often more substantial than the disagreement itself.

Closing Reflection

The Bible clearly teaches that spiritual gifts exist and that the Holy Spirit equips believers for service (1 Corinthians 12:4–11).

The debate concerns the extent to which miraculous gifts continue today.

Continuationists emphasize the biblical promises that gifts accompany believers and continue until Christ returns (Mark 16:17–18; 1 Corinthians 13:8–10).

Cessationists emphasize the unique role these gifts played in establishing the authority of the apostles and the foundation of the early Church (Hebrews 2:3–4; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 2:20).

Both positions seek to account for the biblical evidence.

Both acknowledge God's ability to act supernaturally.

Both recognize that miracles serve divine purposes rather than human curiosity.

What can be said with confidence is that God's power has not diminished (Luke 1:37).

Whether one believes miraculous gifts remain common, rare, or largely confined to specific periods of history, the source remains the same.

The Holy Spirit continues to work according to God's wisdom and purpose (John 3:8).

Whatever position one ultimately adopts, the focus should remain not on the gifts themselves but on the God who gives them.

For the purpose of every spiritual gift is ultimately to glorify Christ and build up His Church (1 Corinthians 12:7; Ephesians 4:11–13).

PART III

THE HISTORY OF DIVISION

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Why Did the Church Split?

Understanding the Roots of Division

"Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you."
— 1 Corinthians 1:10

After examining the major doctrinal disagreements within Christianity, a natural question emerges:

How did the Church become so divided in the first place?

Today there are thousands of Christian denominations and traditions throughout the world. While many of these groups share the same belief in Christ's death and resurrection, they often differ on doctrine, governance, worship, and practice (1 Corinthians 15:3–4).

The existence of these divisions can be discouraging.

Christ prayed for unity among His followers (John 17:20–23).

The apostles repeatedly warned against factions, rivalries, and divisions within the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:10–13; Galatians 5:19–21).

Yet Christian history is filled with separations, disputes, and schisms.

To understand the present condition of Christendom, it is necessary to understand how these divisions developed.

The purpose of this chapter is not to assign blame to one group or another.

Rather, it is to examine the historical events that contributed to division and consider the lessons they teach.

The First Major Schism

One of the most significant divisions in Christian history occurred between what would become the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Traditionally, this separation is dated to the year 1054 and is commonly known as the Great Schism.

While the split is often summarized as a single event, the reality is more complex.

Tensions had been developing for centuries.

Disagreements existed concerning church authority, theology, culture, language, and practice.

One major issue concerned the authority of the Bishop of Rome.

The Western Church increasingly emphasized the authority of the Pope as a universal shepherd and source of ecclesiastical unity.

The Eastern churches generally preferred a model in which bishops, synods, and councils shared authority more collectively, reflecting earlier conciliar patterns of governance.

Questions also arose concerning the procession of the Holy Spirit.

The Western Church affirmed that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, while the Eastern Church maintained that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone (John 15:26).

Additional disagreements involved church customs, clerical practices, liturgical traditions, and the authority to modify the Nicene Creed.

Although these disagreements may appear narrow to modern readers, they reflected deeper concerns regarding authority, doctrine, and the faithful preservation of teachings the Church had received from earlier generations.

The result was a separation that continues to affect Christianity to this day.

The Protestant Reformation

The next major division occurred in the sixteenth century.

In 1517, the German monk and theologian Martin Luther publicly circulated what became known as the Ninety-Five Theses.

His initial goal was not to create a new church but to address practices he believed required reform within the existing Western Church.

One of Luther's primary concerns involved the sale of indulgences, a practice he viewed as inconsistent with biblical teaching regarding repentance, forgiveness, and grace (Ephesians 2:8–9).

As conflict escalated, Luther was eventually excommunicated by Pope Leo X in 1521 and declared an outlaw by the Holy Roman Empire.

What began as an attempt at reform ultimately resulted in separation.

This moment proved historically significant.

For the first time in centuries, a major movement openly separated from the authority of Rome while claiming to preserve biblical truth.

Whether one agrees with Luther's conclusions or not, an important precedent has been established. The domino was pushed.

Separation in the name of doctrinal correction had become a reality within Western Christianity.

The Growth of Further Divisions

Once the Reformation began, additional disagreements quickly emerged.

Those who agreed with Luther did not always agree with one another.

Different leaders examined Scripture and reached different conclusions.

One significant example involved disagreements between Lutheran and Reformed traditions.

Issues included church practices, religious imagery, liturgical customs, and the nature of the Lord's Supper.

Questions concerning election, predestination, and the extent of Christ's atonement also contributed to division (Romans 8:29–30; Ephesians 1:4–5).

Each group believed it was preserving important biblical truths.

Each sought to remain faithful to Scripture.

Yet the result was further fragmentation.

Over time, additional movements emerged, including Anabaptists, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, and numerous others.

Many of these groups arose from sincere efforts to address perceived doctrinal, practical, or spiritual concerns.

The Pattern of Division

As Christian history progressed, a pattern emerged.

A group perceived corruption, error, imbalance, or neglect.

It attempted reform.

If reform failed, separation followed.

The newly formed group eventually developed its own traditions, structures, and interpretations.

Later generations sometimes identified new concerns within that movement and repeated the process.

Over time, divisions multiplied.

Many separations were initially motivated by sincere desires to preserve truth.

Yet each successful separation also established a precedent that future generations could follow.

What began as extraordinary responses to extraordinary circumstances gradually became a common solution to disagreement.

This pattern stands in tension with Scripture's repeated calls for unity, reconciliation, and mutual forbearance within the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:1–6; Colossians 3:12–15).

The Challenges of Communication

When examining the divisions of Christian history, it is important to remember that the world of the past was very different from our own.

Today, ideas can be shared instantly across the globe.

Conversations that once would have required months can now occur in moments.

Christians can access Scripture, theological writings, historical documents, and the perspectives of believers from around the world with little effort.

For most of Christian history, this was not the case.

Communication was slow.

Travel was difficult.

Literacy was far less common.

The printing press would not be invented until the mid-fifteenth century.

Many believers never possessed a personal copy of Scripture, and even church leaders often worked with limited access to manuscripts and theological resources.

Misunderstandings could persist for years before clarification was possible.

Disputes that might be resolved through a brief conversation today could continue for generations.

Cultural and linguistic differences further complicated matters.

Eastern Christians often spoke Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, or other languages.

Western Christians increasingly spoke Latin.

Concepts expressed clearly in one language did not always translate easily into another.

As a result, disagreements were not always the result of bad intentions or deliberate rebellion.

Sometimes they were amplified by distance, limited communication, political circumstances, and the challenges of understanding one another across cultural boundaries.

This does not remove human responsibility, nor does it fully explain the divisions that occurred.

Pride, ambition, and sin still played their part (James 4:1–2; Galatians 5:19–21).

Yet a fair assessment of history should recognize that many believers faced obstacles to communication and understanding that are difficult for modern readers to fully appreciate.

In some respects, Christians today possess opportunities for dialogue and cooperation that previous generations could scarcely imagine.

Whether those opportunities are used wisely remains an important question for the modern Church.

Sin and Human Nature

At a deeper level, Christian division cannot be explained solely through historical circumstances.

Scripture consistently teaches that human beings struggle with pride, ambition, rivalry, and self-interest (Galatians 5:19–21; James 3:14–16).

These tendencies do not disappear simply because a person belongs to a church.

The same fallen nature that creates conflict within families, communities, and nations can also create conflict within religious institutions.

Division often involves a mixture of legitimate concern and human weakness.

Corruption may create the initial conflict, but pride, ego, fear, and certainty can continue to fuel further fragmentation.

All Christians must honestly examine their own hearts before assuming that division is always someone else's fault (Matthew 7:3–5).

When Secondary Issues Become Primary

One of the dangers of division is that disagreements concerning secondary doctrines can eventually overshadow foundational truths.

Christians who agree that Jesus is Lord may nevertheless separate over questions that, while important, are not central to the Gospel itself (Romans 14:1–13).

This does not mean secondary doctrine is unimportant.

Truth matters deeply.

The challenge lies in maintaining perspective.

The Church must distinguish between doctrines essential to the faith and doctrines upon which sincere believers may disagree.

Failure to make that distinction often magnifies division unnecessarily.

History demonstrates that Christians sometimes separated not because they denied Christ, but because they reached different conclusions regarding issues that, while significant, did not alter the core message of the Gospel.

Closing Reflection

The history of Christian division is both understandable and tragic.

Some separations emerged from genuine efforts to preserve truth.

Others were influenced by power struggles, cultural differences, political pressures, or personal ambitions.

Often multiple factors were involved simultaneously.

The lesson is not that doctrine should be ignored.

Nor is the lesson that every division was unjustified.

Rather, the lesson is that division carries consequences.

Every separation should be approached with seriousness, humility, and prayer.

The Church belongs to Christ (Ephesians 1:22–23; Colossians 1:18).

Whenever believers divide, something precious is wounded.

Understanding how those divisions occurred should not encourage further fragmentation.

It should encourage wisdom.

And perhaps, where possible, it should encourage reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18–20).

For if history teaches anything, it is that preserving truth and preserving unity must never be treated as enemies.

The Church has often struggled when pursuing one while neglecting the other.

Faithfulness requires both.

PART IV

LIVING FAITHFULLY AMID DISAGREEMENTS

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Christian Living

The Purpose of Doctrine

"Speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ."
— Ephesians 4:15

Throughout this discussion, we have examined numerous doctrines, disagreements, and divisions within Christianity. We have considered questions concerning salvation, election, church authority, spiritual gifts, baptism, and many other subjects.

These discussions are important because truth matters (John 17:17).

Yet doctrine was never intended to become an end in itself.

The purpose of sound doctrine is not merely to win arguments. It is to help believers know God more faithfully, worship Him more fully, and live in a manner worthy of the Gospel (Titus 2:1; Philippians 1:27).

Knowledge without love can become pride (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Conviction without humility can become division (James 3:13–18).

The Christian life requires more than correct beliefs. It requires Christlike character (Romans 8:29).

As believers seek truth, they must also seek to reflect the character of the One who is Truth (John 14:6).

The Example of Christ

The ultimate model for Christian conduct is Jesus Christ Himself.

Throughout the Gospels, Christ consistently demonstrated humility, patience, compassion, and grace (Matthew 11:29; Philippians 2:5–8).

He spoke boldly when truth required boldness (Matthew 23:13–36).

He confronted error when correction was necessary (Mark 7:6–13).

Yet He never treated people as enemies to be conquered.

Even while correcting others, He sought their restoration (Luke 19:10).

This balance is essential.

Christians are not called to abandon truth in the name of kindness.

Neither are they called to abandon kindness in the name of truth.

The example of Christ demonstrates that both are necessary.

Truth and love were never intended to be rivals (Ephesians 4:15).

Humility Before God

One of the recurring themes throughout this discussion has been humility.

The reason is simple.

Every believer possesses incomplete knowledge (1 Corinthians 13:12).

No Christian understands every doctrine perfectly.

No denomination has exhausted the depths of God's wisdom (Romans 11:33–34).

No individual sees all things with complete clarity.

Scripture repeatedly reminds believers of their limitations (Isaiah 55:8–9).

Human understanding is real, but it is finite.

This reality should produce humility rather than arrogance.

The more a person learns about God, the more he recognizes how much remains beyond his comprehension.

Humility does not weaken conviction.

Rather, it tempers conviction with the recognition that one's understanding remains dependent upon God's grace (James 1:5).

Bearing With One Another

The New Testament repeatedly calls believers to bear with one another in love (Ephesians 4:1–3; Colossians 3:12–14).

This command becomes especially important when disagreements arise.

Differences of opinion are inevitable.

Different experiences, backgrounds, personalities, and traditions often lead sincere believers to different conclusions.

The question is not whether disagreements will occur.

The question is how Christians will respond when they do.

Scripture consistently encourages patience (James 1:19).

Believers are instructed to listen carefully, speak thoughtfully, and avoid unnecessary quarrels (2 Timothy 2:23–24).

The goal is not merely peaceful coexistence.

The goal is preserving the unity of the Spirit within the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3).

This requires maturity.

It requires self-control (Galatians 5:22–23).

It requires a willingness to value fellow believers even when disagreements remain unresolved.

Correcting With Gentleness

The Christian faith does not require silence in the face of error.

There are times when correction is necessary.

There are times when doctrine must be defended (Jude 3).

There are times when false teaching must be confronted (Titus 1:9–11).

The manner of correction, however, matters greatly.

Scripture repeatedly instructs believers to correct others with gentleness (2 Timothy 2:24–25; Galatians 6:1).

The purpose of correction is restoration, not humiliation.

The goal is helping others move closer to truth, not demonstrating personal superiority.

History provides many examples of doctrinal disputes that became unnecessarily destructive because pride replaced humility.

When correction becomes an opportunity for self-exaltation, it ceases to reflect the spirit of Christ.

The Danger of Pride

Pride is one of the greatest threats to Christian unity.

It often disguises itself as conviction.

It can convince believers that certainty equals righteousness and that disagreement automatically indicates rebellion.

Pride shifts attention away from God's truth and toward personal victory.

When this occurs, theological discussions become competitions rather than opportunities for growth.

The New Testament repeatedly warns against this danger (Proverbs 16:18; James 4:6).

Knowledge alone can create arrogance (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Love, however, builds up.

This does not mean knowledge is unimportant.

It means knowledge must remain joined to humility.

The pursuit of truth should produce gratitude rather than self-importance.

Serving Rather Than Winning

Many doctrinal disputes become focused upon winning.

The objective becomes proving oneself correct.

The conversation becomes centered upon victory rather than understanding.

Yet Scripture presents a different model.

Christians are called to serve one another (Galatians 5:13).

They are called to encourage one another (Hebrews 10:24–25).

They are called to build one another up (Romans 14:19).

Even theological discussion should be governed by these principles.

The question should not simply be:

"How can I prove my position?"

The question should also be:

"How can I help my brother or sister grow in faith?"

This perspective changes the tone of disagreement.

It transforms debate into discipleship.

The Unity of the Body

The Church is repeatedly described as a body (1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Romans 12:4–5).

Different members perform different functions.

Different gifts serve different purposes.

Yet all remain connected to the same head, Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:18).

This imagery reminds believers that they are not isolated individuals.

They belong to one another (Romans 12:5).

When Christians attack one another unnecessarily, the body suffers.

When believers divide over every disagreement, the body weakens.

The New Testament does not call for uniformity in every secondary matter.

It calls for unity in Christ (Ephesians 4:4–6).

That unity should remain visible even when differences persist.

Essential Truths and Secondary Matters

One of the most important skills Christians can develop is learning to distinguish between essential doctrines and secondary doctrines.

Certain truths define the Christian faith itself.

The identity of Christ (John 1:1–14; Colossians 2:9).

His death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3–4).

The reality of sin (Romans 3:23).

The necessity of grace (Ephesians 2:8–9).

The authority of God (Isaiah 46:9–10).

These truths occupy a unique place within Christianity.

Other doctrines, while important, do not carry the same weight.

Failing to distinguish between these categories often magnifies division.

Every disagreement begins to appear equally significant.

Every difference becomes a potential reason for separation.

Wisdom requires proportion.

Not every disagreement should be treated as a crisis (Romans 14:1–13).

Love as the Highest Virtue

The New Testament consistently places love at the center of Christian conduct (1 Corinthians 13:1–13).

Love does not replace truth.

Neither does it ignore doctrine.

Rather, love governs how truth is expressed.

Without love, even correct doctrine can become destructive.

Without love, theological knowledge becomes hollow.

Without love, unity becomes impossible.

Love enables believers to disagree without hostility.

It allows correction without cruelty.

It makes patience possible.

It reflects the character of Christ.

This is why Scripture repeatedly presents love as the distinguishing mark of Christian maturity (John 13:34–35).

Areas of Agreement

Despite the many doctrinal disagreements discussed throughout this conversation, Christians across traditions generally agree on several truths concerning the Christian life.

They agree that believers are called to follow the example of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:21; Philippians 2:5–8).

They agree that humility is a virtue and that pride is a danger (James 4:6; Proverbs 16:18).

They agree that believers should love God and love their neighbors (Matthew 22:37–40).

They agree that Christians should pursue holiness, obedience, and spiritual growth (1 Peter 1:15–16; Ephesians 4:13).

They agree that truth matters and that God's Word should guide the life of faith (John 17:17; 2 Timothy 3:16–17).

They agree that believers should encourage one another, bear one another's burdens, and seek the unity of the body of Christ (Galatians 6:2; Ephesians 4:1–6).

Most importantly, they agree that Christian character should increasingly reflect the character of Christ Himself (Romans 8:29).

These shared convictions remind believers that while doctrinal disagreements may remain, the practical call of Christian discipleship is remarkably similar across much of Christendom.

Closing Reflection

The ultimate test of doctrine is not merely whether it can be explained.

It is whether it produces greater conformity to Christ (Romans 8:29).

The Christian life involves both truth and character.

Believers are called to pursue sound doctrine (Titus 2:1).

They are also called to pursue humility, patience, gentleness, and love (Colossians 3:12–14).

Throughout history, Christians have disagreed on many subjects.

Those disagreements will likely continue.

The challenge is not eliminating every disagreement.

The challenge is learning to disagree in a manner worthy of the Gospel (Philippians 1:27).

Truth should never be abandoned.

Love should never be abandoned.

And wherever both are faithfully maintained, the Church reflects the character of its Lord (Ephesians 4:15).

CHAPTER TWENTY

Unity Without Uniformity

Must Christians Agree on Everything?

"Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."
— Ephesians 4:3

One of the questions that naturally arises after examining Christian doctrine is whether unity requires complete agreement.

Many believers assume that true unity can only exist when everyone holds identical views on every theological subject. At first glance, this assumption seems reasonable. If truth matters, should not all Christians arrive at the same conclusions?

Yet the history of Christianity demonstrates that sincere believers often reach different conclusions while remaining committed to the same Lord, the same Scriptures, and the same Gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1–4).

This reality raises an important question:

Can Christians remain united without becoming uniform?

The New Testament suggests that they can (Romans 14:1–13; Ephesians 4:1–6).

Unity Is Not Uniformity

Unity and uniformity are not the same thing.

Uniformity requires sameness.

Unity requires harmony.

Paul uses the imagery of a body to describe this reality. A body contains many members performing different functions, yet all remain united under one head (1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Romans 12:4–5).

Likewise, the Church has always contained diversity.

The early Church included Jews and Gentiles (Acts 15:1–29; Galatians 2:11–14).

It included wealthy believers and poor believers (James 2:1–9).

It included scholars, laborers, merchants, government officials, and fishermen (Acts 16:14–15; Matthew 4:18–22).

Different cultures, personalities, and backgrounds all became part of the same body.

The apostles did not attempt to eliminate every difference.

Instead, they sought to preserve unity amid those differences (Ephesians 4:3).

The Example of the Early Church

The New Testament records numerous disagreements among believers.

Questions arose concerning dietary practices (Romans 14:1–6).

Questions arose concerning holy days (Romans 14:5–6).

Questions arose concerning Gentile converts and the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:1–29).

Even respected leaders occasionally disagreed. Paul publicly opposed Peter in Antioch over an issue related to fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers (Galatians 2:11–14).

Yet the apostles consistently worked toward preserving fellowship whenever possible.

The Jerusalem Council serves as an important example (Acts 15:1–29).

The issue under consideration was significant. It concerned the relationship between Gentile believers and the requirements of the Law.

The discussion was vigorous.

Arguments were presented.

Evidence was considered.

Scripture was examined.

Yet the goal remained the preservation of truth and unity together.

The early Church understood that disagreement did not automatically require division.

The Danger of Making Every Issue Ultimate

One of the recurring causes of division is the tendency to elevate every disagreement to the highest possible level.

When every doctrine becomes a test of fellowship, unity becomes impossible.

When every disagreement is treated as a threat to the Gospel, fragmentation becomes inevitable.

This does not mean secondary doctrines are unimportant.

It means they should be understood in proper proportion.

Wisdom recognizes degrees of importance.

Not every issue carries the same weight.

Failure to acknowledge this reality often creates unnecessary conflict within the Church (Romans 14:1–13).

Fellowship Despite Differences

Christian fellowship is grounded primarily in a shared relationship with Christ.

Believers may differ on many subjects while still worshiping the same Savior.

This principle does not erase disagreement, nor does it require pretending differences do not exist.

Rather, it allows believers to acknowledge disagreement honestly while continuing to recognize one another as members of the same family (Ephesians 2:19; Galatians 3:26–29).

The historic Christian tradition has often summarized this principle in a statement commonly attributed to Rupertus Meldenius:

"In essential matters, unity.
In secondary matters, liberty.
In all matters, charity."

Whether or not every Christian applies this principle in exactly the same way, it captures an important truth.

Christians should be able to disagree strongly while still treating one another with patience, kindness, and respect (Colossians 3:12–14).

Conviction and charity are not enemies.

Indeed, without love, even correct doctrine can become harmful (1 Corinthians 13:1–3).

Learning From One Another

Disagreement can sometimes become an opportunity for growth.

When believers encounter different perspectives, they are often challenged to examine their own assumptions more carefully (Proverbs 27:17).

This does not mean every alternative position is correct.

Yet throughout church history, careful discussion and debate have often contributed to greater clarity regarding important doctrines.

When approached with humility and a commitment to Scripture, disagreement can sharpen understanding rather than destroy fellowship.

The Witness of Unity

Jesus taught that the unity of His followers would serve as a testimony to the world (John 17:20–23).

This does not imply perfect organizational unity or the absence of all disagreement.

Rather, it points toward a deeper spiritual reality.

The world should be able to see something different in the way Christians relate to one another.

A community that demonstrates humility, patience, forgiveness, and mutual respect provides a powerful witness (Ephesians 4:1–3; Colossians 3:12–15).

Conversely, when believers constantly attack one another, the credibility of that witness suffers.

The Church's unity is not merely an internal concern.

It affects how the Gospel is perceived by those outside the faith.

Unity Around Christ

Ultimately, Christian unity is not founded upon complete agreement regarding every doctrine.

It is founded upon Christ.

Believers are united because they share a common Savior (Acts 4:12).

They share a common hope (Ephesians 4:4).

They share a common mission (Matthew 28:18–20).

The closer Christians move toward Christ, the closer they often move toward one another.

This does not eliminate every disagreement.

But it provides a foundation strong enough to sustain fellowship despite those disagreements.

The center of Christianity is not a theological system.

The center of Christianity is Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:15–20).

Areas of Agreement

Despite the disagreements that have contributed to the fragmentation of Christianity, believers across many traditions continue to share important convictions.

They agree that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:9–11).

They agree that salvation is found through Him alone (Acts 4:12).

They agree that Scripture is God's revelation and should guide the life of faith (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

They agree that believers are called to worship God, proclaim the Gospel, pursue holiness, and love one another (Matthew 28:18–20; John 13:34–35).

They agree that the Church belongs to Christ and that He alone is its head (Colossians 1:18).

They agree that Christian unity is something Scripture repeatedly encourages and that division should never be treated lightly (Ephesians 4:1–6; 1 Corinthians 1:10).

These shared convictions do not erase doctrinal differences, but they do remind believers that they possess far more in common than is often recognized.

Remembering this common foundation can help Christians pursue truth without forgetting their fellowship in Christ.

Closing Reflection

Scripture repeatedly calls Christians to pursue unity (Ephesians 4:1–6).

This unity is neither built upon ignoring truth nor demanding complete agreement.

Rather, it is founded upon a shared commitment to Christ and a shared desire to follow Him faithfully.

The challenge facing every generation is learning how to hold convictions firmly while holding one another graciously.

When truth is pursued without love, division follows.

When love is pursued without truth, compromise follows.

Scripture calls believers to pursue both (Ephesians 4:15).

The Church is strongest not when every believer thinks exactly alike, but when believers remain united in Christ while pursuing truth together.

Unity does not require uniformity.

It requires a common center.

For Christians, that center is not a denomination, a theological system, or a particular tradition.

It is Jesus Christ.

And as believers draw nearer to Him, they often discover that they are drawing nearer to one another as well.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When Division Is Necessary

Unity Has Boundaries

"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them."
— Romans 16:17

Throughout this discussion, a recurring theme has been the pursuit of unity, humility, and reconciliation among Christians.

Scripture repeatedly calls believers to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:1–6), to bear with one another in love (Colossians 3:12–14), and to seek reconciliation whenever possible (2 Corinthians 5:18–20).

Yet these calls to unity should not be misunderstood.

The Bible does not teach unity at any cost.

Christian unity is grounded in truth, and there are circumstances in which separation becomes necessary.

The goal of this discussion has never been to suggest that all disagreements are acceptable, that doctrine is unimportant, or that Christians should ignore sin for the sake of peace.

Rather, the goal has been to distinguish between disagreements among sincere believers and situations that threaten the integrity of the Gospel itself.

When False Gospels Are Preached

Perhaps the clearest example appears in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Certain teachers were proclaiming a message that altered the Gospel of salvation through Christ.

Paul's response was direct:

"But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8–9).

Paul did not encourage compromise.

He did not suggest that the disagreement was merely a difference of opinion.

The issue concerned the Gospel itself.

When the message of salvation is fundamentally altered, Christian unity cannot be maintained through silence.

Truth must be defended.

The Gospel is not ours to redefine.

It is God's revelation entrusted to the Church (Jude 3).

When Sin Is Celebrated Rather Than Repented Of

Scripture also recognizes situations in which unrepentant sin threatens the health of the Church.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul addresses a case of serious sexual immorality that was being tolerated within the congregation (1 Corinthians 5:1–2).

Rather than calling the church to overlook the situation in the name of unity, Paul instructs them to exercise discipline.

The goal was not punishment for its own sake.

The goal was repentance, restoration, and the protection of the wider body (1 Corinthians 5:5–7).

Similarly, Jesus outlines a process for addressing persistent, unrepentant sin among believers (Matthew 18:15–17).

The process begins with private correction.

If necessary, it expands to involve additional witnesses and eventually the broader church.

Only after repeated refusal to repent does separation occur.

Even then, the purpose remains restorative rather than vindictive.

When Leaders Abuse Their Authority

Throughout Scripture, God repeatedly condemns leaders who misuse their position.

Jesus warned against religious leaders who burdened others while failing to practice what they taught (Matthew 23:1–4).

Peter instructed elders to shepherd God's people willingly and humbly rather than lording authority over them (1 Peter 5:1–3).

When church leaders persistently abuse authority, distort Scripture, exploit others, or refuse accountability, believers may be forced to separate from such leadership in order to remain faithful to Christ.

The ultimate loyalty of Christians belongs not to human leaders but to the Lord Himself (Ephesians 1:22–23; Colossians 1:18).

Error, Heresy, and Separation

One reason division has become so common is that Christians sometimes fail to distinguish between ordinary error and teachings that undermine the foundations of the faith.

Every believer holds some incorrect beliefs because human understanding remains limited (1 Corinthians 13:12).

If every mistake justified separation, no Christian fellowship could survive.

Yet some teachings strike at the heart of Christianity itself.

Historically, the Church has described such teachings as heresy because they deny foundational truths concerning God, Christ, or the Gospel.

Wisdom requires learning the difference.

Not every disagreement is heresy.

Not every mistake is apostasy.

Not every doctrinal error warrants division.

The inability to distinguish between primary doctrines and secondary doctrines has often produced unnecessary fragmentation within the Church.

Faithfulness requires both conviction and discernment.

The Pattern of Scripture

When examining the New Testament, a pattern emerges.

Believers are encouraged to exercise patience regarding many disagreements (Romans 14:1–13).

They are called to bear with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2–3).

They are instructed to correct one another gently (Galatians 6:1).

They are urged to pursue reconciliation whenever possible (Matthew 5:23–24).

Yet when the Gospel itself is corrupted, when serious sin is celebrated rather than repented of, or when false teachers persist in leading others astray, Scripture also calls for firm action (Galatians 1:8–9; Titus 3:10–11).

The biblical pattern is therefore neither endless tolerance nor constant separation.

It is patient correction first.

Reconciliation where possible.

Separation only when faithfulness to Christ requires it.

Areas of Agreement

Despite disagreements concerning church discipline, authority, and the precise boundaries of fellowship, Christians across many traditions generally agree on several important principles.

They agree that truth matters and should not be sacrificed for the sake of superficial peace (John 17:17).

They agree that the Gospel must be preserved and faithfully proclaimed (Galatians 1:8–9; Jude 3).

They agree that serious, unrepentant sin harms both individuals and the Church (1 Corinthians 5:6–7).

They agree that correction should aim at restoration whenever possible (Galatians 6:1).

They agree that Christian leaders are accountable to God and should exercise authority with humility and integrity (1 Peter 5:1–3).

They agree that unity remains a biblical priority, even when separation occasionally becomes necessary (Ephesians 4:1–6).

These shared convictions remind believers that the purpose of discipline and separation is never division for its own sake.

Rather, it is the preservation of truth, the protection of God's people, and the restoration of those who have gone astray.

Closing Reflection

Christian unity is precious, but it is precious precisely because it is unity in the truth.

Believers should therefore be slow to divide and eager to reconcile.

Yet faithfulness to Christ sometimes requires separation when the Gospel is corrupted, serious sin is defended, or truth is abandoned altogether.

Even then, the goal should never be pride, victory, or self-righteousness.

The goal should be faithfulness to Christ, protection of His Church, and, whenever possible, restoration.

The biblical pattern is neither compromise nor constant conflict.

It is truth joined with love.

Patience joined with conviction.

Mercy joined with faithfulness.

Where that balance is maintained, the Church reflects both the holiness and the grace of its Lord.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Primary and Secondary Doctrines

Distinguishing What Is Essential

"Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."
— Ephesians 4:3

Throughout this discussion, we have examined many of the disagreements that have contributed to division within Christianity.

Some concern matters that lie at the heart of the Christian faith.

Others concern important questions on which sincere believers have reached different conclusions.

Wisdom requires recognizing the difference.

Not every doctrine carries the same weight.

Some truths are foundational to Christianity itself.

Others, while important, have historically been understood differently by faithful believers who nevertheless share the same Lord.

The ability to distinguish between these categories is essential for both doctrinal clarity and Christian unity.

Without such distinctions, every disagreement appears equally significant, and every difference becomes a potential cause for division.

Primary Doctrines

Primary doctrines concern the identity of God, the identity of Christ, the Gospel, and humanity's need for salvation.

Scripture teaches that there is one God (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 45:5; 1 Timothy 2:5).

Scripture also reveals God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14).

Throughout Christian history, believers have recognized the triune nature of God as a foundational doctrine of the faith.

This affirmation does not attempt to resolve every theological question concerning the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Christians have historically disagreed about certain aspects of that relationship, including the procession of the Holy Spirit.

Such questions will be considered separately.

The essential point here is that Christians worship one God revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Scripture further teaches that Jesus Christ is both fully divine and fully human (John 1:1–14; Colossians 2:9; 1 Timothy 2:5–6).

It teaches that Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3–4).

Humanity is fallen and separated from God by sin (Romans 3:23; Isaiah 59:2).

All people stand in need of salvation because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

Scripture not only teaches that humanity is sinful, but also identifies actions and attitudes that stand opposed to God's will.

Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, sin includes idolatry, sexual immorality, adultery, theft, murder, deceit, greed, drunkenness, envy, hatred, pride, selfish ambition, and other behaviors that violate God's commands (Exodus 20:1–17; Romans 1:28–32; Galatians 5:19–21; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10).

Because sin separates humanity from God, Scripture consistently calls people to repentance.

Jesus began His ministry proclaiming, “Repent, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

The apostles likewise called people to repent and turn to God (Acts 2:38; Acts 3:19).

Repentance is not merely feeling sorrow for sin.

It is a sincere turning away from sin and a turning toward God in faith and obedience.

The reality of sin and the necessity of repentance are not secondary matters.

They are foundational truths that help explain why the Gospel is necessary.

Scripture teaches that salvation is found through Jesus Christ alone.

Christ Himself declared, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Scripture likewise teaches that “there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and humanity (1 Timothy 2:5).

Scripture also teaches that salvation is a gift of God's grace received through faith rather than earned through human effort (Ephesians 2:8–9).

From beginning to end, salvation rests upon God's mercy and Christ's redemptive work.

Scripture further teaches that history is moving toward the fulfillment of God's purposes.

Jesus Christ will return in glory as He promised (Matthew 24:30; Acts 1:11).

The dead will be raised, and all people will stand before God to give an account (John 5:28–29; Romans 14:10–12; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

Scripture speaks of Christ judging the living and the dead and of the final establishment of God's kingdom (2 Timothy 4:1; Revelation 20:11–15).

While Christians may disagree concerning the details and timing of future events, the reality of Christ's return, resurrection, and final judgment has long been recognized as a foundational doctrine of the Christian faith.

Finally, believers are called not merely to affirm these truths intellectually but to follow Christ in daily life.

Christians are instructed to imitate Christ's example (1 Corinthians 11:1), grow toward spiritual maturity (Ephesians 4:13), and walk in love as Christ loved us (Ephesians 5:1–2).

These truths form the foundation of Christianity.

Remove them, and the faith itself is fundamentally altered.

Secondary Doctrines

Secondary doctrines are not unimportant.

They deserve careful study, sincere conviction, and faithful obedience.

Yet Christians have historically disagreed about many of these subjects while continuing to affirm the same Gospel and the same Lord.

Examples include the proper mode and timing of baptism, the relationship between divine sovereignty and human choice, differing understandings of the Lord's Supper, the procession of the Holy Spirit, church government, spiritual gifts, and various views concerning the end times.

These questions matter.

Yet it is worth asking what practical effect many of these disagreements have on the daily life of a Christian and whether they justify continued division among believers who share the same faith in Christ.

Baptism

Consider the question of baptism.

Christians have debated the proper subjects of baptism for centuries.

Some traditions baptize infants, while others reserve baptism for those who personally profess faith in Christ.

Despite these differences, nearly all Christian traditions recognize that a person who consciously places his faith in Christ may be baptized.

This shared conviction may provide an important point of common ground.

If Christians are serious about pursuing greater visible unity, it may be worth considering whether believer's baptism provides a practical path forward.

Such a practice does not require denying the sincerity or faith of those who were baptized as infants.

Nor does it require condemning previous generations of Christians who held different convictions.

Rather, it recognizes that baptism is repeatedly connected in Scripture with personal faith, repentance, and confession (Acts 2:38; Acts 8:36–38; Romans 10:9–10).

A believer who willingly identifies with Christ through baptism participates in a practice that Christians across traditions generally affirm.

This observation is not offered as a declaration that every disagreement has been solved.

Nor is it intended to deny God's ability to save apart from circumstances that humans might consider ideal.

Christ Himself promised salvation to the repentant thief on the cross, a man who was never baptized yet placed his faith in the Savior beside him (Luke 23:39–43).

The deeper question concerns unity.

If Christians desire greater fellowship with one another, should they continue debating who has received a valid baptism, or should they seek a path that all believers can recognize and affirm?

Election and Free Will

Christians have long debated the relationship between God's sovereignty and human choice.

Yet regardless of where believers fall within that discussion, they remain called to the same responsibilities.

They are called to worship God, proclaim the Gospel, repent of sin, pray, serve others, and follow Christ.

While these debates may shape theological understanding, they rarely alter the practical duties of Christian discipleship.

God knows those who are His, and His judgment is perfect (2 Timothy 2:19).

Christians are therefore called to remain faithful to the work before them rather than allowing this disagreement to become a source of hostility or division.

The Lord's Supper

Christians have also disagreed concerning the nature of the Lord's Supper.

Some view it primarily as a memorial.

Others understand it as a sacrament through which Christ is uniquely present.

These differences should not be dismissed lightly.

Yet both sides approach the table seeking to honor Christ, remember His sacrifice, and participate in the practice He commanded (Luke 22:19–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26).

The practical life of Christian discipleship remains largely unchanged.

Both seek Christ.

Both worship Christ.

Both remember Christ.

The Procession of the Holy Spirit

The dispute concerning whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone or from the Father and the Son played a significant role in historical divisions within Christianity.

Yet for most believers, this disagreement has little effect on daily Christian life.

Christians on both sides affirm the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and worship the one triune God.

The question remains important for theology, but it is difficult to see how it justifies continued separation among believers who share the same Lord and Savior.

Spiritual Gifts

Christians also differ concerning spiritual gifts.

Some believe miraculous gifts continue today.

Others believe certain gifts ceased after the apostolic era.

Regardless of these differences, Scripture calls believers to test all things, hold fast to what is good, and exercise discernment (1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 John 4:1).

If God chooses to work in extraordinary ways, He is certainly capable of doing so.

At the same time, Christians must remain watchful against deception and false teaching.

The focus of the Christian life should never be extraordinary experiences themselves, but faithful devotion to Christ.

A Call for Perspective

The purpose of distinguishing between primary and secondary doctrines is not to minimize truth.

Rather, it is to recognize that some truths define Christianity itself, while others concern how Christians understand and apply those truths.

Where primary doctrines are denied, the foundations of the faith are threatened.

Where secondary doctrines are debated, believers should strive for humility, charity, and patience.

Many of the divisions that exist within Christianity today persist because secondary disagreements have been treated as though they carry the weight of primary doctrines.

Yet Christians who affirm the same Lord, the same Gospel, and the same hope in Christ already possess far more in common than they often realize.

The question facing the Church is not whether these discussions matter.

The question is whether they matter enough to justify continued division.

That question deserves careful consideration from every believer.

Areas of Agreement

Despite disagreements concerning baptism, election, church government, spiritual gifts, and many other secondary doctrines, Christians across traditions generally agree on several foundational truths.

They agree that there is one God and one Savior, Jesus Christ (Deuteronomy 6:4; Acts 4:12).

They agree that Christ died for sins and rose again (1 Corinthians 15:3–4).

They agree that humanity is sinful and in need of redemption (Romans 3:23).

They agree that salvation comes through God's grace and the work of Christ (Ephesians 2:8–9).

They agree that Scripture is God's authoritative revelation (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

They agree that believers are called to love God and love one another (Matthew 22:37–40).

They agree that Christ will return and that God will ultimately judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31).

These shared convictions are not minor points of agreement.

They form the very foundation of the Christian faith.

Recognizing this common ground does not eliminate every disagreement.

It does, however, provide a basis for humility, cooperation, and fellowship among believers who differ on secondary matters.

Unity Through Christ

Scripture declares that believers are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).

That unity does not eliminate every disagreement, nor does it require Christians to abandon conviction.

It does, however, challenge believers to consider whether every disagreement warrants division.

Not every disagreement requires separation.

Not every difference requires another denomination.

Christians who share the same Lord, the same Gospel, and the same hope should strive to remember that they are members of the same body.

The New Testament consistently points believers back to their common identity in Christ rather than their differences (Ephesians 4:4–6).

The closer Christians move toward Christ, the closer they often move toward one another.

A Common Foundation

If Christians hope to move toward greater unity, they must share a common foundation.

That foundation cannot be personal preference, denominational loyalty, or the authority of a particular teacher.

It must be the Word of God.

Scripture remains the common reference point through which Christians test doctrine, correct error, and pursue truth (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Without such a foundation, disagreements become impossible to resolve because every claim can appeal to an authority outside the text itself.

This does not mean every question will be settled immediately.

Christians will continue to disagree on many issues.

Yet Scripture provides the common ground upon which those discussions can occur.

For this reason, believers should hold firmly to the foundational truths of the faith, approach secondary disagreements with humility, and seek unity wherever faithfulness to Christ allows.

Closing Reflection

Christianity has never lacked disagreement.

From the earliest days of the Church, believers have wrestled with difficult questions, debated doctrine, and sought to understand God's truth more fully.

Yet Scripture consistently directs believers to distinguish between truths that define the faith and questions upon which faithful Christians may differ.

Wisdom requires both conviction and perspective.

Primary doctrines must be guarded because they concern the identity of God, the person of Christ, the Gospel, and the hope of salvation.

Secondary doctrines deserve careful study and sincere conviction, but they should not automatically become barriers to fellowship among those who share the same Lord.

The Church is strongest when believers stand firmly upon the foundations of the faith while extending humility, patience, and charity toward one another in matters where Scripture has been understood differently.

For Christians are not ultimately united by complete agreement on every doctrine.

They are united by Jesus Christ.

And wherever believers remain faithful to Him, they already possess a deeper unity than many divisions would suggest.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A Call to Reconciliation

The Wound of Division

"That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee..."
— John 17:21

Throughout this discussion, we have examined many of the disagreements that have shaped Christian history. Some concern important doctrines. Others concern church practice, authority, or interpretation. Yet beneath them all lies a common question:

How should believers respond when sincere Christians reach different conclusions?

The purpose has never been to declare one group righteous and another condemned. Nor has it been to suggest that doctrine is unimportant.

Truth matters.

Scripture matters.

Sound teaching matters (2 Timothy 3:16–17; Titus 2:1).

At the same time, the current state of Christendom should give every believer pause.

The Church is divided for many reasons. Entire traditions often view one another with suspicion, caution, or dismissiveness, even when they share the same confession that Jesus Christ is Lord (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3).

This reality raises an important question:

If we are members of the same body, how should we relate to one another when disagreement remains?

Remembering How Division Began

As discussed previously, many of the great divisions of Christian history did not begin because sincere believers were patiently studying Scripture together and arriving at different conclusions.

Many divisions began because of active sin, corruption, abuses of authority, failures of leadership, political pressures, cultural tensions, or limitations in communication (James 4:1–2; Galatians 5:19–21).

In some cases, separation became necessary because repentance and reform were refused.

Yet over time, the precedent of division itself became normalized.

What began as extraordinary responses to extraordinary circumstances gradually influenced later generations.

Today, churches often separate over matters that previous generations may have regarded as secondary or tertiary issues.

As divisions accumulate, believers increasingly define themselves by what distinguishes them from one another rather than by what unites them in Christ. Often people ask what kind of Christian you are?

This trend should concern us.

Disagreement Does Not Require Separation

One of the central themes of this discussion has been that sincere Christians can arrive at different conclusions while studying the same Scriptures.

Human beings are finite (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Our knowledge is incomplete.

Our understanding is imperfect.

Because of this, disagreement is not surprising.

What is surprising is how quickly disagreement can become separation.

A difference of interpretation does not automatically require isolation.

A disagreement concerning a secondary doctrine does not automatically make someone an enemy.

Simply disagreeing with a tertiary concept between fallible human beings does not warrant division from one another.

There are certainly boundaries that define the Christian faith.

There are doctrines that cannot be abandoned without abandoning Christianity itself (1 Corinthians 15:1–4; Galatians 1:8–9).

But many of the disagreements examined throughout this discussion occur among people who genuinely desire to follow Christ and honor His Word.

The Limits of Verbal Unity

Many Christians today sincerely affirm that all believers are part of one body in Christ.

They acknowledge one another as fellow believers, even when they belong to different denominations or traditions.

Yet an important question remains.

If we truly believe that we are one Church, why do we continue to live as though we are many?

It is common to hear Christians speak of unity while simultaneously accepting permanent separation as normal.

We may recognize one another as brothers and sisters in the faith, yet continue to maintain structures that communicate division.

To be clear, some divisions arose from serious concerns and were not created lightly.

Others may have been necessary responses to corruption or error.

The purpose of this observation is not to condemn previous generations.

Rather, it is to ask whether modern Christians have become too comfortable with a divided Church.

There is a difference between acknowledging the spiritual unity of believers and actively pursuing greater visible unity among believers.

The first is often affirmed.

The second is rarely pursued.

In some cases, we may have learned to live with division rather than grieve it.

We may have become accustomed to saying, “We are all one in Christ,” while giving little thought to what greater unity might require.

If Christ prayed that His followers would be one (John 17:20–23), and if Scripture repeatedly calls believers to preserve unity (Ephesians 4:1–6), then perhaps the existence of division should trouble us more than it does.

The goal is not uniformity.

The goal is not the elimination of every disagreement.

The goal is simply to ask whether our present condition reflects the unity Christ desired for His Church. When Christ returns, will there be denominational labels in his kingdom?

That question deserves honest consideration from every Christian, regardless of denomination or tradition.

One Church, One Faith, One Lord

"There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all."
— Ephesians 4:4–6

These truths are larger than denominational labels, theological systems, and traditions that have developed throughout history.

The Christian's primary identity is not found in a denomination, movement, or theological camp.

It is found in Christ (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:3–4).

As this discussion draws to a close, perhaps the most important questions are not:

Are you Baptist?

Are you Calvinist?

Are you Orthodox?

Are you Catholic?

Rather, the more important questions are these:

Do you love Jesus Christ?

Do you believe in Him?

Do you confess Him as Lord and Savior? (Romans 10:9–10)

Are you seeking to follow Him? (John 14:15)

Are you striving, however imperfectly, to live a life pleasing to God? (Philippians 2:12–13)

If so, then there is already a bond between believers that no denominational label can create or remove.

Obstacles to Reconciliation

If reconciliation is so clearly encouraged in Scripture, why has it proven so difficult?

Part of the answer lies in the obstacles that continue to stand in its way.

Pride

Perhaps the greatest obstacle is pride.

Christians can become more concerned with winning arguments than understanding one another.

Yet Scripture repeatedly calls believers to humility, reminding us that all human understanding is limited (1 Corinthians 13:12; Philippians 2:3–4).

Tribal Identity

Many Christians derive a strong sense of identity from their denomination, tradition, or theological system.

While these affiliations can be valuable, they should never become more important than our identity in Christ.

When loyalty to a group exceeds loyalty to Christ, division becomes easier to justify (Galatians 3:26–29).

Fear

Some believers fear that reconciliation requires compromising truth.

As a result, any movement toward greater unity may be viewed with suspicion.

Yet pursuing reconciliation does not require abandoning conviction.

Christians can remain committed to truth while still extending charity and fellowship to those with whom they disagree (Ephesians 4:15).

Historical Wounds

Many divisions originated during periods of genuine conflict, corruption, persecution, or doctrinal controversy.

Even when the original circumstances have changed, the wounds left behind can continue to shape relationships for generations.

Understanding this history can help believers approach one another with greater patience and grace.

Recognizing these obstacles does not solve them.

It does, however, help us see that the greatest barriers to reconciliation are often not doctrinal disagreements themselves, but the attitudes and assumptions that surround them.

If unity is ever to grow, these obstacles must be faced honestly and prayerfully.

A Practical Path Toward Unity

Calls for reconciliation are meaningful, but eventually a practical question must be asked:

What might reconciliation actually look like?

Scripture does not provide a detailed blueprint for resolving every modern division.

It does, however, provide several principles that can help guide Christians toward greater unity.

First, Christ alone is the head of the Church (Ephesians 1:22–23; Colossians 1:18).

Every Christian tradition should begin there.

No denomination, institution, leader, or movement occupies the place that belongs to Christ alone.

Second, the New Testament repeatedly presents church leadership as accountable leadership.

Whether one emphasizes elders, bishops, councils, or other structures, authority within the Church is never intended to operate without accountability (Acts 14:23; 1 Peter 5:1–3).

Third, local congregations are not portrayed as isolated communities existing entirely unto themselves.

The churches of the New Testament cooperated, communicated, supported one another, and worked together for the advancement of the Gospel (2 Corinthians 8–9).

Perhaps the clearest example appears in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–29).

When a major doctrinal disagreement arose, believers did not immediately divide into separate movements.

Apostles and elders gathered together, examined the issue, searched the Scriptures, discussed the evidence, and sought God's guidance before reaching a conclusion.

The example demonstrates that serious disagreements need not automatically produce separation.

Christians can study together, deliberate together, and seek wisdom together before concluding that division is necessary.

While sincere Christians may differ concerning the ideal structure of the Church, it seems reasonable to suggest that any movement toward greater unity should include several elements:

• Christ recognized as the ultimate authority over the Church.

• Faithfulness to the apostolic teaching preserved in Scripture.

• Accountable leadership.

• Cooperation among congregations.

• Meaningful processes for addressing disputes before separation occurs.

Such principles do not eliminate every disagreement.

They do, however, create conditions in which disagreements may be addressed without immediately producing further fragmentation.

This is not presented as a claim of perfect certainty, nor as a complete solution to every question facing the Church.

Christians will likely continue to disagree on many practical matters.

Yet the broader principle remains clear.

If believers desire reconciliation, they must be willing to do more than affirm unity in theory.

They must also consider how churches can cooperate, resolve disagreements, and maintain fellowship in practice.

The goal is not uniformity.

The goal is not institutional domination.

The goal is not the elimination of every difference.

The goal is a Church that reflects both the truth and the unity for which Christ prayed:

"That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21).

Perfect unity may not be fully realized in this age.

Human limitations, historical divisions, and doctrinal disagreements will continue to challenge the Church.

Nevertheless, Christians should not become comfortable with division.

They should continue seeking truth, pursuing reconciliation where possible, and remembering that they ultimately belong to one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all (Ephesians 4:4–6).

The path may be difficult.

The work may be unfinished.

But the pursuit of greater unity remains a worthy calling for every follower of Christ.

Before We Divide

Before separating from another believer, congregation, or Christian tradition, it may be wise to prayerfully consider several questions.

About the Issue Itself

• Is the Gospel itself being altered? (Galatians 1:8–9)

• Is a foundational doctrine of the Christian faith being denied? (1 Corinthians 15:1–4)

• Is this issue essential to Christianity, or is it a secondary matter? (Romans 14:1–13)

About Sin and Repentance

• Is serious sin being practiced and defended rather than repented of? (1 Corinthians 5:1–7)

• Have biblical steps of correction been followed? (Matthew 18:15–17)

• Has repentance been sought before separation was considered?

About My Own Heart

• Am I seeking faithfulness to Christ or victory in an argument? (James 3:13–18)

• Do I genuinely understand the position of the person with whom I disagree? (Proverbs 18:13)

• Have I represented their beliefs fairly and accurately?

• Have I listened as carefully as I have spoken? (James 1:19)

• Have I honestly considered the possibility that I may be mistaken about some aspect of this issue? (1 Corinthians 13:12)

About Christian Unity

• Have I distinguished between disagreement and apostasy?

• Am I treating a brother or sister in Christ as an enemy? (Romans 12:18)

• Will division help preserve truth, or will it simply create another unnecessary separation?

• Have all reasonable efforts toward reconciliation been attempted? (Matthew 5:23–24)

About My Motives

• Would I still hold this position if it were not the position of my denomination, tradition, or favorite teacher?

• Am I more loyal to Christ than I am to my theological tribe? (Galatians 2:20)

• Do I desire restoration, or do I simply want to be proven right?

A Final Question

Perhaps the most important question is this:

If Christ were visibly standing between us, would He tell us to separate immediately, or would He first tell us to humble ourselves, listen carefully, search the Scriptures together, and pursue reconciliation? (John 17:20–23)

Not every disagreement can be resolved.

Not every division can be avoided.

But Christians should be slow to divide, eager to reconcile, and careful to ensure that separation occurs only when faithfulness to Christ truly requires it.

A Final Word

The major purpose of this discussion has been reconciliation.

Just as humanity is reconciled to God through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18–20), Christians should seek reconciliation with one another wherever faithfulness to Scripture allows.

The Bible itself tells the story of reconciliation—from humanity's separation from God through sin (Genesis 3) to restoration through Christ (Romans 5:10–11).

A second purpose has been to demonstrate that Christians are often far less divided than they sometimes imagine. While real doctrinal differences exist, believers across many traditions share the same Lord, the same Gospel, the same Scriptures, and the same hope (Ephesians 4:4–6). Many of the divisions that developed throughout history arose during times marked by limited communication, political pressures, cultural conflicts, and circumstances very different from those we face today. While those historical disagreements should not be ignored, neither should they prevent believers from pursuing greater understanding and fellowship in the present.

Throughout this discussion, we have also been reminded of the limits of human understanding. Scripture teaches that "now we see through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). There remain questions that sincere Christians continue to answer differently. Yet Scripture also points forward to a day when God's purposes will be fully revealed. As John writes concerning the completion of God's plan:

"But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished..." (Revelation 10:7).

One day, every misunderstanding will be removed. Every question will be answered. Every believer will see with perfect clarity what is now understood only in part.

Until that day, let us pursue truth diligently.

Let us study Scripture carefully.

Let us hold our convictions sincerely.

But let us also remember that we are called to love one another (John 13:34–35).

If you love Christ, believe in Him, and seek to follow Him, then you are not my enemy.

You are my brother.

You are my sister.

You are my family.

And perhaps the Church will move closer to healing when believers once again see one another that way.

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13. Acts 19:1–6
14. 2 Corinthians 12:12
15. Ephesians 2:20
16. Hebrews 2:3–4
17. Luke 1:37
18. John 3:8
19. Acts 3:1–10
20. Acts 8:4–8
21. Acts 19:11–12

Chapter 18

Biblical Sources:

1. 1 Corinthians 1:10
2. 1 Corinthians 15:3–4
3. John 17:20–23
4. 1 Corinthians 1:10–13

5. Galatians 5:19–21
6. John 15:26
7. Ephesians 2:8–9
8. Romans 8:29–30
9. Ephesians 1:4–5
10. Ephesians 4:1–6
11. Colossians 3:12–15
12. James 4:1–2
13. Matthew 7:3–5
14. Romans 14:1–13
15. Ephesians 1:22–23
16. Colossians 1:18
17. 2 Corinthians 5:18–20

Historical References:

1. Great Schism
2. Protestant Reformation
3. Martin Luther
4. Ninety-Five Theses
5. Pope Leo X
6. Holy Roman Empire
7. Development of the papacy and medieval church governance
8. Eastern and Western church disputes concerning the Filioque controversy
9. Growth of Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal traditions
10. Invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century
11. Historical linguistic divisions between Greek-speaking East and Latin-speaking West

Historical information regarding the Great Schism, the Protestant Reformation, medieval church governance, the Filioque controversy, and the development of Christian denominations is drawn from standard works of Christian history and widely accepted historical scholarship.

Chapter 19

1. Ephesians 4:15
2. John 17:17
3. Titus 2:1
4. Philippians 1:27
5. 1 Corinthians 8:1
6. James 3:13–18

7. Romans 8:29
8. John 14:6
9. Matthew 11:29
10. Philippians 2:5–8
11. Matthew 23:13–36
12. Mark 7:6–13
13. Luke 19:10
14. 1 Corinthians 13:12
15. Romans 11:33–34
16. Isaiah 55:8–9
17. James 1:5
18. Ephesians 4:1–3
19. Colossians 3:12–14
20. James 1:19
21. 2 Timothy 2:23–24
22. Ephesians 4:3
23. Galatians 5:22–23
24. Jude 3
25. Titus 1:9–11
26. 2 Timothy 2:24–25
27. Galatians 6:1
28. Proverbs 16:18
29. James 4:6
30. Galatians 5:13
31. Hebrews 10:24–25
32. Romans 14:19
33. 1 Corinthians 12:12–27
34. Romans 12:4–5
35. Colossians 1:18
36. Romans 12:5
37. Ephesians 4:4–6
38. John 1:1–14
39. Colossians 2:9
40. 1 Corinthians 15:3–4
41. Romans 3:23
42. Ephesians 2:8–9
43. Isaiah 46:9–10
44. Romans 14:1–13
45. 1 Corinthians 13:1–13
46. John 13:34–35
47. 1 Peter 2:21
48. Matthew 22:37–40

49. 1 Peter 1:15–16
50. Ephesians 4:13
51. 2 Timothy 3:16–17
52. Galatians 6:2

Chapter 20

1. Ephesians 4:3
2. 1 Corinthians 15:1–4
3. Romans 14:1–13
4. Ephesians 4:1–6
5. 1 Corinthians 12:12–27
6. Romans 12:4–5
7. Acts 15:1–29
8. Galatians 2:11–14
9. James 2:1–9
10. Acts 16:14–15
11. Matthew 4:18–22
12. Romans 14:1–6
13. Romans 14:5–6
14. Ephesians 2:19
15. Galatians 3:26–29
16. Colossians 3:12–14
17. 1 Corinthians 13:1–3
18. Proverbs 27:17
19. John 17:20–23
20. Colossians 3:12–15
21. Acts 4:12
22. Ephesians 4:4
23. Matthew 28:18–20
24. Colossians 1:15–20
25. Philippians 2:9–11
26. 2 Timothy 3:16–17
27. John 13:34–35
28. Colossians 1:18
29. 1 Corinthians 1:10
30. Ephesians 4:15

Historical Reference:

1. Rupertus Meldenius (Peter Meiderlin), commonly attributed author of the statement: "In essential matters, unity. In secondary matters, liberty. In all matters, charity."

Chapter 21

1. Romans 16:17
2. Ephesians 4:1–6
3. Colossians 3:12–14
4. 2 Corinthians 5:18–20
5. Galatians 1:8–9
6. Jude 3
7. 1 Corinthians 5:1–2
8. 1 Corinthians 5:5–7
9. Matthew 18:15–17
10. Matthew 23:1–4
11. 1 Peter 5:1–3
12. Ephesians 1:22–23
13. Colossians 1:18
14. 1 Corinthians 13:12
15. Romans 14:1–13
16. Ephesians 4:2–3
17. Galatians 6:1
18. Matthew 5:23–24
19. Titus 3:10–11
20. John 17:17

Chapter 22

1. Ephesians 4:3
2. Deuteronomy 6:4
3. Isaiah 45:5
4. 1 Timothy 2:5
5. Matthew 28:19
6. 2 Corinthians 13:14
7. John 1:1–14
8. Colossians 2:9
9. 1 Timothy 2:5–6
10. 1 Corinthians 15:3–4
11. Romans 3:23
12. Isaiah 59:2
13. Exodus 20:1–17
14. Romans 1:28–32
15. Galatians 5:19–21
16. 1 Corinthians 6:9–10
17. Mark 1:15

18. Acts 2:38
19. Acts 3:19
20. John 14:6
21. Acts 4:12
22. Ephesians 2:8–9
23. Matthew 24:30
24. Acts 1:11
25. John 5:28–29
26. Romans 14:10–12
27. 2 Corinthians 5:10
28. 2 Timothy 4:1
29. Revelation 20:11–15
30. 1 Corinthians 11:1
31. Ephesians 4:13
32. Ephesians 5:1–2
33. Acts 8:36–38
34. Romans 10:9–10
35. Luke 23:39–43
36. 2 Timothy 2:19
37. Luke 22:19–20
38. 1 Corinthians 11:23–26
39. 1 Thessalonians 5:21
40. 1 John 4:1
41. 2 Timothy 3:16–17
42. Matthew 22:37–40
43. Acts 17:31
44. Galatians 3:28
45. Ephesians 4:4–6

Chapter 23

1. John 17:21
2. 2 Timothy 3:16–17
3. Titus 2:1
4. Romans 10:9
5. 1 Corinthians 12:3
6. James 4:1–2
7. Galatians 5:19–21
8. 1 Corinthians 13:12
9. 1 Corinthians 15:1–4
10. Galatians 1:8–9
11. John 17:20–23

12. Ephesians 4:1–6
13. Ephesians 4:4–6
14. Galatians 2:20
15. Colossians 3:3–4
16. Romans 10:9–10
17. John 14:15
18. Philippians 2:12–13
19. Philippians 2:3–4
20. Galatians 3:26–29
21. Ephesians 4:15
22. Ephesians 1:22–23
23. Colossians 1:18
24. Acts 14:23
25. 1 Peter 5:1–3
26. 2 Corinthians 8–9
27. Acts 15:1–29
28. 1 Corinthians 5:1–7
29. Matthew 18:15–17
30. James 3:13–18
31. Proverbs 18:13
32. James 1:19
33. Romans 12:18
34. Matthew 5:23–24
35. 2 Corinthians 5:18–20
36. Genesis 3
37. Romans 5:10–11
38. Revelation 10:7
39. John 13:34–35